

IV

Keep Them Rolling to the Meuse

On August 25th, the Division reverted to XII Corps, Third Army, and was paired with the 4th Armored Division to spearhead the drive across France. The very rapid movement of the XII Corps in the ensuing days prevented the retreating Germans from establishing major defensive positions along the Marne or Meuse Rivers. Not until the Germans had reached the high ground east of the Moselle were they able to dig in and make a coordinated stand.

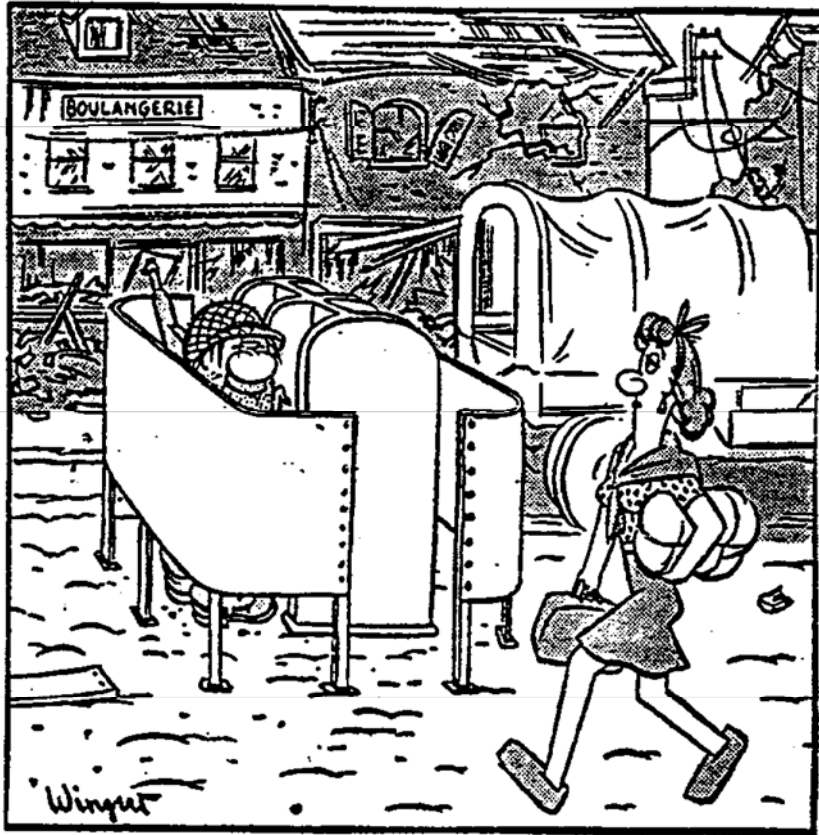
The 80th Division was motorized and on the 26th, proceeded eastward from the Argentan area to an assembly area in the vicinity of Sens (about 50 miles southeast of Paris). From there it continued to the northeast toward Troyes only to find that the Germans had blown all the main bridges across the Seine and Aube Rivers. The division turned north towards Chalons-Sur-Marne in search of intact bridges or suitable fording sites. After a further advance Chalons-Sur-Marne was taken on the 29th, providing a bridgehead across the Marne River.

The 314th left Juvigny-Sur-Orne at 0500 on Aug. 26, and in an all day and all night march of some 293 miles passed through Mortree, Sille-le-Guillaume, Ecommey, Vendome, Orleans, and Montargis and arrived at the rendezvous area, Collemiers (5 miles southwest of Sens), at 0730 on the morning of the 27th. About noon, the Battalion continued another 54 miles to Orvilliers-St. Julien and went into position to support the 318th's further advance to the northeast. The route went through Sens, Villeneuve, and Estissac.

The hedgerows of Normandy were now far behind, but the countryside of France continued to provide new and interesting sights. Many still recall those huge manure piles right in front of the houses in the narrow streets of the villages through which we passed. Recalled also was the custom of combining the house and barn in one building, with the animals often occupying a room connected directly to the family kitchen. Several also remembered how many of the people in the farming villages raised "Camp Phillips" sized rabbits just like their counterparts in the U.S. raised chickens. Bruce Dunsha noted: "I remember the huge piles of turnips we saw in many of the fields we passed. The turnips were the biggest I had ever seen, at least two or three times larger than the ones sold at our corner grocery. It wasn't until much later that I learned that they weren't turnips at all, but sugar beets."

Another curiosity that caught the eye of many was the public or street toilets in some of the towns. Frank Lankford summed it up best when he said: "When going through one of the small towns, I saw my first curbside toilet. It was a metal shielding that was built over a part of the sidewalk and out over the curb and about as high as your head with a door at each end. You could see feet as people stood there relieving themselves."

But the move halfway across France was far from just a panorama of tourist curiosities, for as Chet Rutkowski points out: "The long race across France was the dustiest, most tiresome ride I ever had. Our cooks made everything OK though. We had hot chow. 'C' rations heated up."



Leaving Orvilliers-St. Julien on Aug. 28, the 314th travelled some 61 miles to Champigneul (west of Chalons) to support the attack on Chalons. En route we had to ford the Seine and Aube Rivers because all the bridges had been blown. The next day the Battalion displaced a few miles to Aulney-Sur-Marne where, about supper time enemy planes appeared over the Marne bridgehead. The Battalion's AA sections opened up on the planes and although some hits were observed there was no confirmation of planes shot down. On the 30th, a displacement of some 7 miles was made to a position just north of Les Grandes Loges (a few miles northwest of Chalons). Again enemy planes appeared and this time strafed the Battalion but there were neither casualties nor damage. The planes were fired upon and, again, while hits were observed, there was no verification of any being shot down. Also on this day, Lt. Edward Bar (Bn. Motor Officer - Sv Btry), while on a supply run, captured thirty prisoners south of Thiebe.

Having travelled so far so fast, the Division had outrun normal supply lines and it was necessary for gasoline, rations and other supplies to be flown to it by C-47 transports.

Indicative of the precarious supply situation is the recollection of Frank Lankford that: "Somewhere near Chalons our trucks were so low on gas that we would be unable to move the next day. Capt. Benford told me to go to a blown-up rail yard that had just been captured that day and where there were several carloads of gas in drums.

"We set out in the pitch black trying to find the rail yard with the aid of a map. Finally, we found a railroad station but could not locate the rail yard. Then we met some MP's at a crossroad who guided us to the area we were seeking.

"The railroad cars with the gasoline were about 50 or 60 feet from the road and separated from it by an iron fence and a six feet deep ditch. We were standing by the cars wondering how we could get the 50 gallon drums out of the cars to our truck. Finally, my driver, Harry Merwin, as unconcerned as though he was saying he was going for a beer, said he would back the truck up to the car if that was what I wanted.

"In total darkness he turned the truck around, pushed over the iron fence, eased through the ditch, slowly bumped over four sets of rails and stopped right up at the side of the car. So gracefully was this done that we had to wake up our crew in the back of the truck to start them loading the gas drums. There I knew Harry had to be the best damned driver in the whole Division."

In the closing days of August and early days of September, the 80th moved south and east from Chalons toward the Meuse River with the mission of seizing Bar-Le-Duc, St. Mihiel and relieving the 4th Armored Division on the high ground east of Commercy.

Path of the 314th FA Bn
August 31 - September 21, 1944

