

HE KEPT ON A-GOIN'

WORLD WAR II REMEMBRANCES OF
JOHN S. SEARCY



Personal Legacy Memoirs



FOREWORD

Daddy has always been our hero. Many afternoons, three little noses would be pressed against the panes of the long living room windows, waiting for Daddy to come home and play with us. As we grew older, play evolved into mentoring. Dad would patiently help us with sports, call spelling words out nightly, stay up past midnight helping with algebra, or wake us up for a glimpse of a lunar eclipse or space landing. He planned memorable camping and road trips where rest stops were not an option. He took us to church every time the doors were open, even when we were on vacation. He was a father who loved, perhaps not in so many words, but in deeds.

When grandkids came into the picture, Dad became Papa John. His two grandsons learned of his service in World War II and begged him for stories. These stories had previously, as Dad put it, been placed in a box (pointing to his mind), and he had turned the key in the lock. Once the box was opened, poignant stories of hardship and heroism came to light.

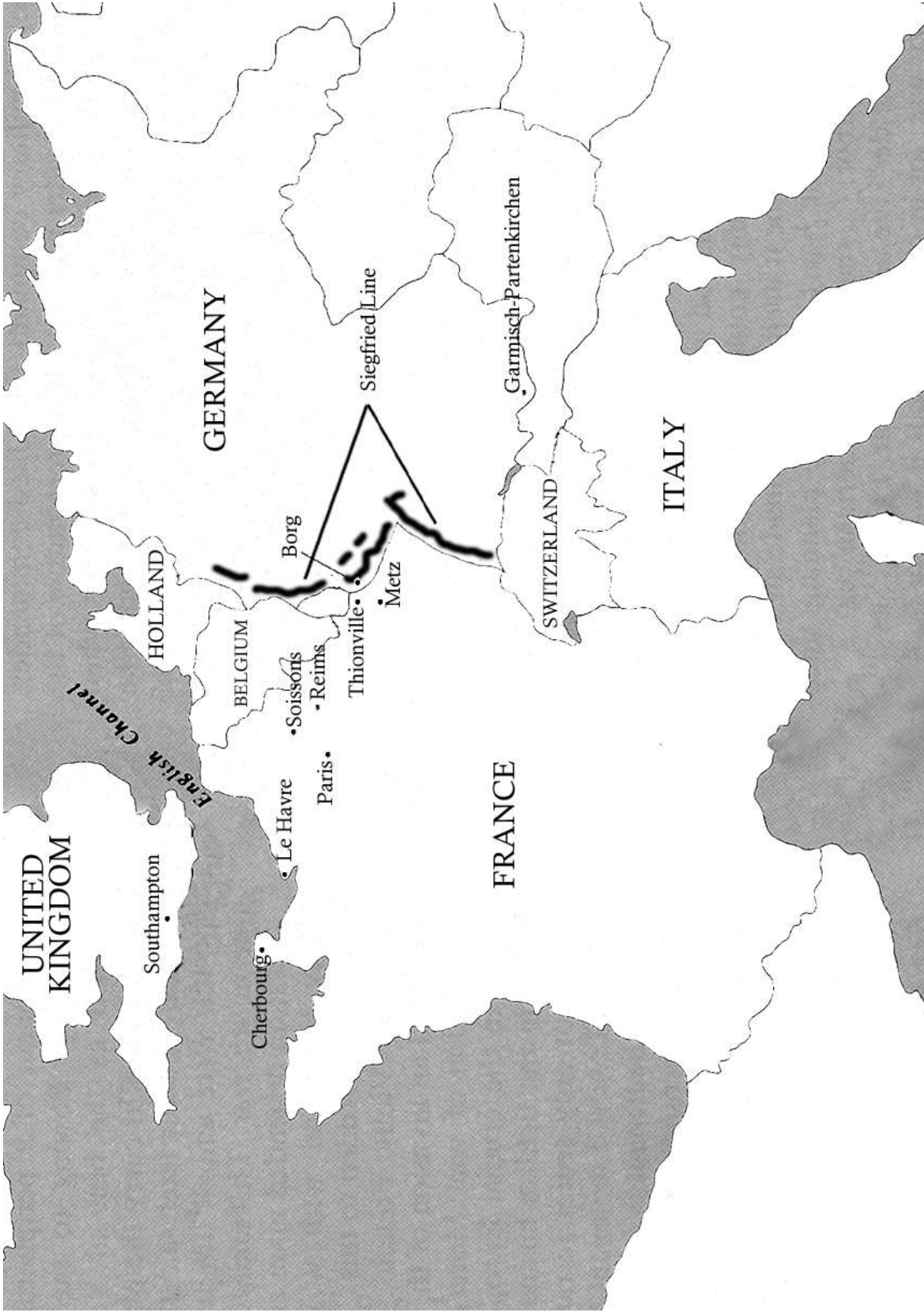
It is difficult to imagine all that Daddy went through as a soldier during World War II. He was only 19 years old – just a kid. Hearing his stories, we were amazed by the ordeal he endured. We began to understand the tremendous impact the war had on his life. He would never be the same.

With this book and with our love, we honor Dad’s legacy and the gift that he and his generation gave us. We cannot thank them enough for all that they went through and all that they did. Our admiration for Dad grows as he continues to face life’s challenges without complaint. He whistles through each hardship. Dad “just keeps on a-goin’” as does our love and respect for our strong, courageous father.

Debbie, John Riley and Brenda Jean



Daddy's 85th birthday. Daddy, Brenda Jean, John Riley and Debbie, Seaside Beach, Florida, 2009.



UNITED KINGDOM

Southampton

Cherbourg

Le Havre

Paris

Soissons

Reims

Thionville

Metz

FRANCE

GERMANY

HOLLAND

BELGIUM

Siegfried Line

Borg

SWITZERLAND

Garmisch-Partenkirchen

ITALY

English Channel

HE KEPT ON A-GOIN'



I was born and raised in Greenville, Alabama. In school, I was active in sports and helped with the school annual and newspaper. I also participated in Boy Scouts (becoming an Eagle Scout), National Honor Society and several other clubs. I graduated from high school in 1943 and entered the army in the latter part of June. I went through 17 weeks of basic training at Fort McClellan, Alabama, in the heavy weapons company. From there, I went to the University of Mississippi for orientation in the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), then on to the University of Georgia to study engineering. We were scheduled to complete a four-year engineering course in just two years, but after one quarter the army decided it needed soldiers more than students. They closed the school and sent the entire class of 700 men to the 10th Armored Division based at Camp Gordon, Georgia. We completed our training there, and I was assigned to the 54th Armored Infantry Battalion, Company B.

In early September 1944, my division was sent to New York for shipment overseas. On board ship, we slept in canvas bunks stacked six high. Most of us became seasick the first day. With several thousand



John in uniform, 1943.

men and limited latrine facilities, you can imagine the mess we had below decks. By our third day at sea, we had just about recuperated, when we ran into a hurricane with 30 to 40 foot waves. Consequently, we all got sick again.

After 13 days, we landed in Cherbourg, France. We were the first division to sail directly from the United States to France, as it had previously been occupied by the Germans. Once on land, we bivouacked and pitched our pup tents in apple orchards while we waited for our tanks, guns and half-tracks to arrive. It started raining and after a few days, the orchards were a sea of mud. We had no laundry or showers available, so we used our helmets for washing clothes and bathing.

After we received our equipment, we set off in convoys. We passed through Paris and headed across France. It was Halloween night when we reached the combat zone near Metz. We were guided by a large, red harvest moon. I'll never forget that moon. We stayed on the edge of Metz for a few days to get acclimated, then my section went around Metz to cut off the Germans. Some of our division went into town with the 90th and 95th Infantry Divisions, and they cut Metz off from the rest of the German army. Several months later they captured some of the forts, the first time in 1500 years that anyone had successfully captured a fort in Metz.

After helping to liberate Metz, we went through France and drove the Germans out of several towns. One of them was Thionville. I remember that one because they had a parade for us. It wasn't much of a celebration, but since we had liberated them they wanted us to have a march through town. We fought through a few other French towns and by November, we were headed for Germany.

We were the first division in the Third Army, commanded by General Patton, to enter Germany - although my battalion had actually entered it earlier by mistake. We attacked the German homeland just before Thanksgiving 1944 at the Siegfried Line near Borg, Germany. The Siegfried Line was a German defense line made up of all kinds of

fortifications. There were pillboxes, dragon's teeth and other tank traps. Pillboxes were concrete, dug-in guard posts with guns and mortars. Dragon's teeth were pyramids of concrete to stop tanks, and there were also ditches and that sort of thing.

When we entered Germany at the Siegfried Line, it was very rainy, muddy and cold. We lost a fair number of people, but we managed to capture several of their fortifications. We stayed in some of the captured pillboxes for several days. There were trenches between the fortifications, and they all had about a foot of water in them, so we ended up standing and wading in water the entire time. If you were in a pillbox you could get out of it for a little while, but every time you went back out, you'd be back in that water. When feet stay wet and cold for too long, they can get swollen and cracked to the point where a man can hardly walk. We lost a number of men who had to be sent to the hospital for "trench foot." My feet got sore, but I wasn't disabled like some of them.

There was a company near us that needed help, and while we were going through the trenches to help them, a mortar shell hit my squad. Out of ten of us, one was killed and six were injured. A man stayed behind to take care of the wounded and the rest of us kept heading up toward the pillbox. Once we'd captured it, I took their 80 mm mortar apart. It was a big tube with a sight on it to get the range and angle for firing. It was pointed right toward where we got hit, and I'm pretty sure it was the mortar that got our squad.

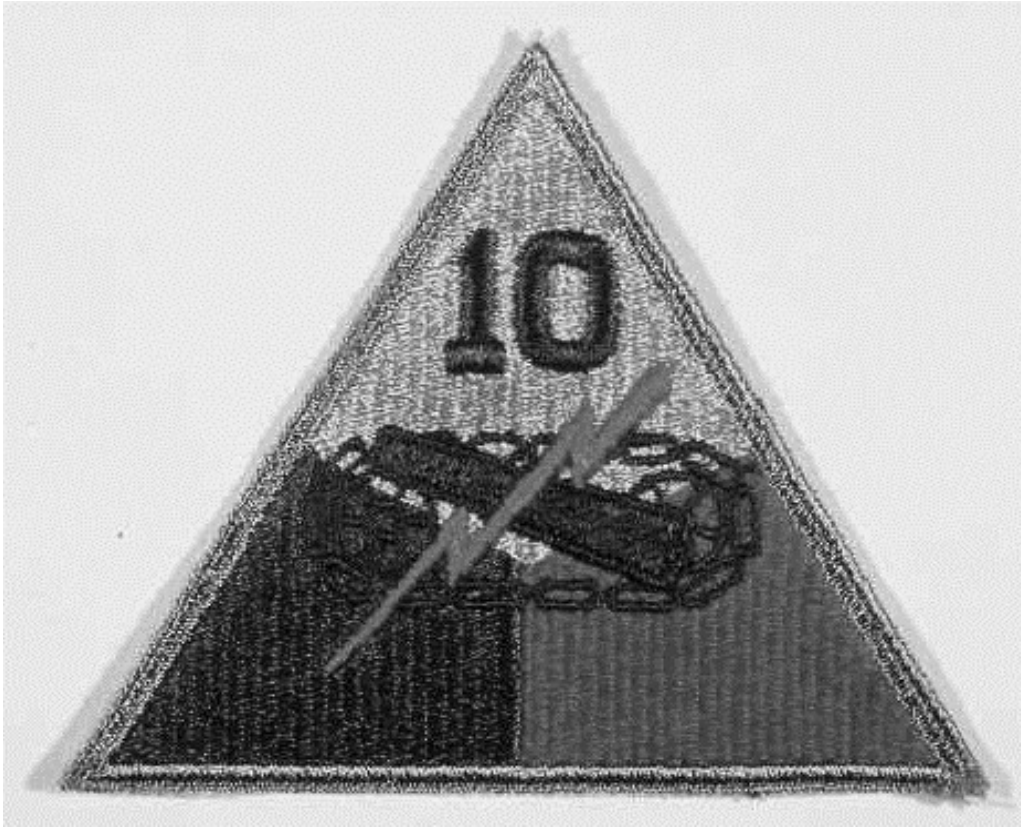
I stayed there for several hours by myself. Later a lieutenant came up, and then we started hearing voices. There was a man coming toward us under white flag, so I told him to come on. He wasn't even a soldier. There were about 15 people in that pillbox, and most of them weren't even German; they were slave laborers from other countries. I recall one German soldier who was particularly arrogant, even after he'd been captured. We had to walk them to where we were keeping prisoners of war. We were in the trench, and we had them walk on top of the trench. Because they were surrendering, their own troops began firing at them, so I had them come down into the trench with us. I took them on down



Dragon's teeth.



Pillbox.



10th Armored Division shoulder patch.

the road and after delivering them, I had to run a couple hundred yards across a field to get back to my platoon.

We stayed in the trenches as much as possible because there was always the chance of snipers. They were continuing to shoot mortars and artillery at us, and we lost quite a few people. We dug in by a bunker at Borg Hill. We had a machine gun outpost, and several American soldiers came by. You could hardly recognize anyone because we were all covered with mud. I didn't know who they were, but one of the fellows recognized me. His name was Fielding and we'd been in the ASTP together at the University of Georgia. We were both in the 10th Armored, but in different companies within the division.

"War sure is hell, isn't it, Searcy?" That was all he said, and then he went on.

After the war, Fielding came to visit me in Louisiana, and I saw him again in Washington at one of the Veterans Reunions.