1LT Lester Kenneth Edsall

1920 – 2017

INTRODUCTION

'This book is not intended to be another documentary or detailed account of World War II. Many of those have been authored and printed in excellent works by renowned authors and experts.

'I would like to say that it is a story of an illustrious, much decorated hero, but it isn't. Rather it is merely a record of the activities, observations, and memories from the belly-on-the-ground-level-view of one infantry soldier, a young man from a farm community in Miami County, Ohio, and covers nearly four years of my life.'

'It is written with the encouragement and insistence of a loving wife who shared these experiences and years. The object is to pass on to my children and grandchildren and other loved ones, an account that answers the question, "What did Lester Edsall do in World War II?" Already the war, which we were sure had ended all wars, had faded in memory and the young people read of it briefly in history classes. It would be a tragedy if humanity forgets the lessons of this great war.'

'If I can draw them closer to this great conflict through my experience, I would be pleased. It has no intention or pretension of even appearing professionally done. Rather, as I write, I picture myself sitting with my family and relating the things as they come to mind. And so the story goes……' (Edsall, pp. 2 – 3)

EARLY YEARS

'*During the time Hitler was planning his strategy and laying the groundwork for his exploits, I was finishing my high school years. I was busy with all the activities that go along with middle and late teens—sports, fishing, movies, dating. I had met one young woman I would later marry, one Edith Morrow. My parents had gotten me through the depression years of the early thirties with very minimum of problems and scars, compared to many. I worked part-time after school and upon graduation from high school was immediately hired as a full-time grocery clerk. I bought a car and things were going very well. The future looked bright, for it seemed that the depression of the 30's was now behind us.'* (Edsall, p. 4)

Edsall and members of his young generation were mostly removed from the rages of war—

> *'so isolated geographically, and insulated from "life" with our lifestyles, social beliefs, and values. Most of us didn't comprehend the impact of the happenings and events that were going to shape our lives. My generation did not really know what war was.'* Edsall, p. 6)

His only connection was a family member who had died in WW I.

GREETINGS FROM THE U.S. ARMY

Newly married to Edie, American persona was about to change when Congress instituted the National Draft on September 16, 1940. Men from Lester's group were taken to Columbus, Ohio, where they took written tests and received physical examinations. The brightest ones who scored 130 or above were destined to become leaders and responsible for others' lives.

Reporting on July 15, 1942, young men like Edsall were given two weeks to settle their affairs, then join the "drafted" lines. Conveyed down a human sidewalk and submitted to more examinations, they found themselves wearing dog tags, uniforms and officially declared privates in the U.S. Army—like so many hundreds-of-thousands before and after them.

> Edsall was sent to 'an *infantry training replacement center in Camp Craft, South Carolina. One of the first things established was understanding the identity and recognition of the supreme being:* the platoon non-commissioned officer.*'*
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> *'We were admonished to obey him blindly and completely. He taught us to jump on command, how to march in unison, move en mass with precision and pride, how to disassemble and assemble a piece (rifle or pistol) and how to make a bed. We learned how to peel potatoes by ourselves. We were taught how to protect ourselves from venereal disease, and how to conduct ourselves as soldiers, including how to salute an officer properly. We had to memorize our dog tag number. We had vaguely heard of SNAFU, KP, C and K rations before the service. Our vocabulary now increased to include such goodies as B.A.R. which was not a local pub, but was an excellent automatic rifle; MESS, a very apt word describing food, but with no reference to the cleanliness of the mess hall, PIECE, a rifle or gun, not the sexual connotations we had learned from street talk; PUP tent, a two-man tent where infantry men led dogs' lives; DRY RUN, a practice operation or exercise, not an unsuccessful trip to the latrine.'* (Edsall, p. 8)

> *'Basic training lasted six weeks. At the end of which, I was selected for message center training. This was special training and relieved me of daily duties of the company. Message center training includes all kinds of communication. Telephone, radio, visual, birds, personal messenger, and cryptography were some of the subjects. Miles and miles of telephone wire were strung and rewound. Installation of a command post was practiced. All this would be helpful to me sooner than I expected.'* (Edsall, p. 8)

Outdated equipment and the devastation of Pearl Harbor were "wake-up calls" for the American public and certainly the military. In order to prepare for the now-certain war, new recruits required the induction and training of experienced officers, non-coms and fighting units, a priority for all services. For Edsall, this meant a promotion to corporal and change of orders to Ft. Benning for 13 weeks of intensive training to become an officer. The new supreme beings *'lay in the hands of our company officers and instructors. The 13 weeks were the most concentrated period of learning I have ever seen.'* (Edsall, pp.10 – 15)

They were commissioned February 22, 1943 as 2nd Lts. in the Army. Most men in the class were ordered to report to a 26th Infantry YD Division (Yankee Division), a National Guard Unit of Massachusetts. Previously, this unit had participated in Carolina maneuvers during peace time, but Pearl Harbor changed the complexion of the mission and their duty became the guarding of the East Coast.

Lt. Edsall joined the 328th Regiment in February 1943 and remembers that with so many new O.C.S. graduates reporting during the same time period, assignments were almost random. He was assigned to *'Co. "L", Third Battalion, 104th Infantry Regiment, 26th Infantry Division.'* (Edsall, p. 18)

Reporting to Company Commander Captain Rigby, Edsall noted the respect Rigby earned and emulated many of his professional traits. Sgt. Bares became his platoon sergeant and he found himself fortunate the second time as Barnes was also wise in the workings of the Army. One deviation Edsall employed, however, was time spent with the enlisted men, a practice Captain Rigsby discouraged, but one Edsall found relevant. (Edsall, p. 19)

Moving from Camp Blanding to Camp Georgia, where the complete 26th Division was gathering, Edie and two female friends of officers moved to Augusta, where close ties were formed.

In this military army arena, Edsall learned, along side those in his platoon, the environments, physical issues, and potential combat conditions which he and others would face. One memorable example involved the concealment and trickery emphasized in the placement and location of booby traps which could cause injury or death.

'Sometimes we pushed the men to the limits of their endurance. Even being a young man, the resilience of youth sometimes amazed me. We would get to the end of the week utterly exhausted and spent. Then the weekend offered cleaning up, inspections and a few precious hours in Augusta or nearby town, and a couple hours rest, and it was back to the weekly training routine with a chance to eat some more of that gritty red soil.' (Edsall, p. 23)

Division components were on the move—but not yet overseas. The next deployment was to Camp Campbell, Kentucky.

'Men were trained in marksmanship on the rifle range with the weapons they would use in combat. Officers were trained in troop leading with short field problems. These very conditions, particularly the weather and terrain of the central Kentucky-Tennessee border in the late fall and winter, turned out to be prophetic conditions we would experience later in the Lorraine area of France and the winter "Battle of the Bulge."' (Edsall, p. 24)

Edie, having moved home because of her pregnancy, sent word that daughter, Karen, was born on November 13, 1943—a truly happy time for the Edsall family, especially since Lester was present six weeks later for her baptism. Repeated moves and replacements are recorded in Lester's writings as the Division continually prepared to depart. *'D-Day occurred and our training and activity increased.'* (Edsall, p. 29)

During this time period, 2nd Lt. Edsall was also promoted to 1st Lt. and transferred to the weapons platoon, where he served in combat.

'The troops were "fine-tuned" with additional training. I qualified for the Expert Infantry Badge. That's the beautiful blue medal with rifle imprinted on it and garnished with a silver wreath, worn on the left chest above the various ribbons and awards earned. The badges were not available at this time and were presented later. However, the immediate reward for those who qualified was a $5.00 increase in monthly pay. It was a rigorous test and the pay well deserved. The physical exercises, foot races, military courses, 25-mile hikes, and obstacle courses certainly tested one's abilities, skills and determination. Marksmanship was also a requirement in the weapons assigned to you. I qualified as expert with the M-1 rifle, the 03 rifle, which I think anyone could fire because it was very accurate, carbine, automatic rifle (B.A.R.), and the bayonet. Fortunately, I did not need to qualify expert with the 45 automatic pistol since it was a close contact weapon. I scored high enough to make marksman. The B.A.R. was my absolute favorite to fire. Its rate of fire and accuracy was phenomenal.' (Edsall, p. 35)

Eventually General Paul's "gangplank" promise of deployment became a reality when Camp Shanks appeared on their schedule, this news accompanied by final examinations and field exercises with a small amphibious landing.

> *'The unit was alerted and went by train to Weehawken, N. J., then by ferry to Staten Island where we boarded the ship SS Argentina on August 24, 1944. One of the last sights of America was Kate Smith standing on the pier, microphone in one hand and on a piece of paper she held over her head to protect her hair from the rain, singing her parting song, "God Bless America".'* (Edsall, pp. 35 – 36)

"THE YANKS ARE COMING"

Taken into service like both the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth, this ship transported all the troops with accompanied equipment, mostly in good weather. Enlisted men ate and slept below decks in tiered hammocks—deep inside the ship which promoted stifling conditions. Officers fared better with shared staterooms and proper settings for meals while still staying alert among themselves and their charges for lighted areas including cigarettes as German U-Boats were constantly on the prowl.

> *'It was noted later that the 26th Division in this convoy was the first troops to go directly from the United States to a port in France, which in our case turned out to be Cherbourg. Also, it was one of the largest armadas ever assembled, to that time, consisting of 101 vessels of all classes.'* (Edsall, p. 39)

> *'On September 7, the coast of France was sighted and as the coast drew near, the sight that greeted us was not a pretty one. This was the first sight of actual combat destruction. Cherbourg Harbor looked like a disaster area with all the crumpled docks and shapes of bare steel sticking up out of the water. Many buildings were extensively damaged. The utter destruction of the harbor facilities was a combination of D-Day offensive and deliberate demolition. When the Germans were driven out, they destroyed docks and wharfs to deny their use to the victorious allied forces.'* (Edsall, p. 41)

> *'The Argentina anchored a good distance from the shore. Some of us were unloaded and had to reach shore via the swaying, rising, and falling invasion type pontoon suspension connections between the sunken concrete bulwarks or piling. That wasn't the most secure feeling I have ever had. Many troops were unloaded in LST boats and brought ashore where the officers waited to collect their charges. Unloading was accomplished as rapidly as possible*

because the ships were still vulnerable as stationary targets [from aircraft].' (Edsall, p. 41)

Harbor areas were hubs of activities with ships unloading equipment and troop-mounted-trucks transporting them to their staging area—55—near St. Martin D'Audoville, with Division headquarters at Bourg de Lester, translation: Lester's village. Dug in now they began to hear artillery with screaming shells overhead and soon learned the sound of friendly fire as distinguished from those from the Germans. Lester writes:

'In spite of the bombing destruction and artillery and tank damage in the bloody hedge row fighting following the landing on D-Day, the area was beautiful. Small fields of farmland[s] each surrounded with thick, tough hedges. There were many small orchards. Under different circumstances in peaceful times, one could imagine the pleasure of strolling or driving down these hedge-lined roads through small quaint provincial villages. One day while in the area, I fished [in] a small stream, but got nothing. How relaxing, though, to be alone.'

'At my level of command, the large picture didn't matter much, but I learned that we were assigned to the 9th Army and were placed in Army Reserve while Brest was being reduced. It never became necessary to commit us.'

'Meanwhile, the rain stopped and the sun came out. To maintain our condition, we marched and did fitness exercising and training. This included hikes to the beaches where we inspected the concrete pill boxes and beach obstacles encountered on D-Day. As I gazed out toward the channel through an opening from inside one of the pillboxes, I remember thinking that it's a marvel that the invasion succeeded.' (Edsall, pp. 42, 43)

The locals were quite adept at trading with whomever passed through their areas—eggs, cheese, cider, Calvados, etc., American cigarettes always valuable trading item.

IN SEARCH OF SUPPLIES

'During this time, our division supplied a thousand or so men with trucks they could spare to an emergency truck unit called the "RED BALL EXPRESS". It was their job to move all the materials being landed to troops on the front lines. The Allies had fought their way out of the peninsula and stormed across France. General Patton was sorely in need because he had outstripped his supplies and had literally run out of gas east of Nancy and just west of the Siegfried line. As a tank specialist, gasoline was critical for his

mode of operation. In one week in September, the daily consumption of gasoline in one 24-hour period averaged 665,360 gallons.' (Edsall, p. 43)

"Keep 'em Rolling": 82 Days on the Red Ball Express.

"The successful Allied invasions dictated that because the deep-water port of Antwerp, Belgium, had been heavily damaged, a solution had to be found for the delivery of needed supplies. Called the "Red Ball" truck route (marked for designation with red balls), it was named after red dots commonly used to indicate priority express trains in the U.S."

"Brigadier General Ewart G. Plank implemented the convoy system on August 21, 1944 with 6,000 trucks and it operated until November 8, 1944. An average of 900 trucks (with two-man teams) drove in a nonstop loop to carry rations, gasoline, ammunition and other vital supplies to troops at the front. They transported more than 412,000 tons of fuel, ammunition, and equipment to 28 divisions and were so successful that similar convoy systems were established throughout France. General Plank declared, "Let it never be said that a lack of supplies stopped Patton when the Germans could not." The heroic actions of the Red Ball Drivers (many who were African Americans) resulted in the distinguished citation of a Campaign Ribbon."

Articles' Sources: The National WWII Museum, New Orleans, 1 February 2021; Smithsonian WORLD WAR II MAP BY MAP, p. 195; and Wikipedia, May 2021

'The breakout of the Allies had been accomplished and they had fanned out eastwardly into Belgium and Holland and across France where the German forces were taking cover behind the Siegfried Line. The Seventh Army and the French Army were coming up from southern France. Some Allied units had moved so fast that many times, German orders were issued to hold positions that had already been passed by the charging Allied troops. Three months had gone by since D-Day and the front lines had more or less established by this time. All along the [front] line there was a continual test of strength, though it was a holding position situation in the interim between the Battle of France and the coming assault of the German homeland.' (Edsall, p. 44)

'At the Moselle River bridgehead, Patton's 4th Armored had veered to the northeast. The German's Fifth Panzer Army which included the 11th Panzer Division (Wietersheims Ghost Division and the one we got to know very well) was attacking northwesterly hoping to

split the Allies in two. They met, and one of the severest tank battles of the entire war was fought with Patton the victor.' (Edsall, p. 46) (Reference MAP IA and MAP IB)

'Having passed Nancy, evidence of increased resistance could be seen—severely damaged buildings, dead animals, shell holes everywhere, and hundreds or perhaps a thousand disabled and destroyed vehicles from both armies (but mostly German) were [evident] throughout the area.' (Edsall, pp. 44 - 46)

Edsall's writings reflected a list of French towns—none so demolished as St. Lo. He has little memory of some crossings because he became, temporarily, a Red Ball Driver, replacing the regular designee who had received little rest or sleep. Now as the driver of this large personnel truck, Edsall had to adjust his night vision by following *'the little red recessed lights—to conceal as much as possible, the movement of various troops and supplies thus trying to maintain the element of surprise concerning the location of Army units and equipment.'* (Edsall, p. 45)

'These limited skirmishes were small in relation to the overhead operation of the allies, but they were important to us. They answered some questions, dispelled some doubts about ourselves, and pointed out some strengths and weaknesses. It WAS combat, and men WERE getting injured or killed, so it helped season us for the later fighting.' (Edsall, p. 55)

'According to the division history account, the reason the 104th met such resistance at Moncourt Woods was that the German troops were ordered not to give up Moncourt Woods under penalty of death—these orders were transmitted directly by Hitler himself in consideration of the fact that he had fought successfully in his first combat engagement in these woods in World War I. We later identified our opposing units as the 11th Panzer Division and the 113th Panzer Brigade.' (Edsall, p. 62) (Reference MAP II)

'As I moved in and out of [Coincourt], I met some of the native people. They acted friendly enough, but they really hadn't faired so badly under the Germans. Now, some of their homes were in ruins partly as a result of our liberation efforts. The Alsace territory has been historically sympathetic to German rule. So it was hard to tell how they really felt. I always thought of this in the same light as the boy scout who helped the little old lady across the street. Actually, she didn't want to cross the street, but he had to do his good deed for the day. We, too, were going to free these villages even if we had to level them to the ground.' (Edsall, p. 63)

'While in Reserves, I got to visit Division Headquarters which was located in a very large woods called Bezange la Grande. Areas such as these were generally considered safe enough for non-combat units to visit. Red Cross would send special trucks with goodies to pass out to the soldiers. While I was there, they brought donuts and coffee. What a treat that was! They also passed out cigarettes.—[During] this time I also [received] my Combat Infantry Badge which I had qualified for before leaving the states. We certainly had qualified many times over since arriving here. Charley Granger, in supply, got me a pair of combat boots. They're a lot more desirable than the shoes and leggings I had been wearing. They had a wide leather band sewed on top of regular shoes. These bands buckled around your leg and the bottoms of your trouser leg could be stuffed into them—more convenient than leggings which had to be strung up all the time.' (Edsall, p. 64)

Edsall also received his liquor ration which consisted of a fifth of White Horse Scotch and a quart of gin. He gave the scotch to his supply and mess sergeants—always a splendid idea to stay on their good side and show appreciation. Using his lemon powder from the C and K rations, he added this to the gin for a Tom Collins—another taste of home.

R&R was also used for weapons training.

'By this time, supplies had pretty well caught up to the front lines and stockpiled. This was in preparation for executing the plans being drawn up for the winter drive through the Siegfried Line into Germany. The Allies didn't plan to let the enemy sit comfortably through the winter behind the Line, as the Germans were hoping to do.' (Edsall, p. 65)

'All through this area of advance, we were meeting with one counter attack after another. The defense of the Germans was not necessarily one of stationary positions, but rather one of strong points which meant occupying hilltops and woods and controlling the areas and roads between points. Thus, he utilized his greatest skill, his armor and infantry strike force. These were used to support moving troops in their rear-guard action. They could and did strike out at any time in vicious counter attacks. Each hilltop strong point had to be taken and held, one by one, knowing the expected counter attack would soon materialize. I am one of the first to recognize the value of artillery and support tanks as being indispensable, but the fact still remains that it is the infantry soldier that has to go in and clear and occupy the ground.—Our advance that day was 'take a little, give a little' and we were always pretty close to the Germans either attacking or defending.' (Edsall, p. 73) <u>(Reference MAP III, MAP IV, MAP V)</u>

Many engagements later, experienced *'from the belly-on-the-ground-level of one infantry soldier'* as stated in the book's Preface, Edsall learned that he was now the senior officer of what remained of "L", "K", and "M" Companies. Their help was being driven off by a heavy shell fire and frontal attacks by flanking enemy units.

> *'Since we had no communication or instructions from the company command post, we, on the front line, didn't realize that the encirclement of our position had been accomplished. We felt that we were holding our own on the line and were not alarmed. We had been in tight places before.'* (Edsall, pp. 83 - 85)

THE REALITY OF CAPTURE

Checking on his men and finding one wounded and one absent, Edsall turned to seek help for them and found the following instead.

> *'Behold, I met a German officer and his orderly who was carrying a stick with a white cloth on it. I thought they might be surrendering since other Germans had surrendered this way. They asked to see the commanding officer. I was going toward town anyway to find a medical aid man, so I told them our CP was back this way and could take them to my captain. He said the town was occupied by his troops and the town had been cleared of our troops by his troops, and there was no one there. That's why he was looking for the senior officer on the line.'* (Edsall, p. 84)

Edsall learned later that while the Germans were moving through the town and *'sticking the muzzle of the tank's gun in each window of the buildings'* killing those inside, some soldiers in the woods were able to escape and regroup closer to American lines.

> *'I told him we had wounded, and he assured me they would be administered to. Needing a little time to digest the impact of my position, I asked if I could go back to my area and explain the situation to the remaining men. He really wouldn't have had to, but he agreed, giving me a designated amount of time before executing his plan.'*
>
> *'One officer from "M" Company, Lt. McKinney, was one of the last that I talked with before going back to the German C.P. Later, he told me at one of our regimental reunions that I had volunteered to stay with the remaining troops. I don't think that is exactly the way it happened. I probably said to him that someone had to stay with the troops, and I was evidently the senior officer. Besides, the German officer knew about me, and I was under truce.'* (Edsall, p. 85)

'By this time, my granted time had expired and I reluctantly went back to my captor. I had no way of knowing how many troops were left since we were units of "K", "L", and "M" companies, and I did not know how many had tried to escape. It was 12:30 or 1 o'clock on November 13, my daughter, Karen's first birthday, when I turned the remaining depleted units over to the Germans. The division history records over 200 casualties (wounded, killed, or captured) at Rodable. The humiliation of defeat, such as this, can only be tempered by the fact that we were captured by one of German's top fighting forces, our nemesis, the 11th Panzer Division.' (Edsall, pp. 84 – 86) (Reference Map VI)

'The time immediately following capture is rather hazy and clouded. This is probably due to a sort of state of shock, or possibly due to preoccupation with events of the last few hours digesting what had gone wrong. I was convinced in my mind that what I did was right. I had stopped a senseless, inevitable slaughter of my men which we could not defend against. Years later, this decision would be endorsed by those who were surrendered at the time. They assured me they felt that I had saved their lives.' (Edsall, p. 88)

'I only remember being on a half-track and being transported to a confinement place. I have no idea how long or how far we traveled, or even how many of us there were. We arrived at some military installation, and I was put in a cell-like enclosure. There was no mattress or covers for the wooden bunk, and it was very cold that first night. We had been searched immediately after our capture, and some items had been confiscated. I had carried a knife in my combat boot. Naturally it was one of the things taken right away. I, also, had my first experience with German rations. We were given ersatz coffee and a small piece of bread.' (Edsall, p. 88)

Lester also commented on the probable contents of both the coffee and bread as compared to those of American soldiers who were accustomed to rations which contained 3500 to 4000 calories per day.

'The German ration would be a fraction of that, about 750 or even less. That would be the reason we would always be hungry in the months ahead.' (Edsall, p. 88)

Since German vehicles were needed at the front lines, the new captives were walked and Lester was *'astonished to see how many horses, carts, and horse drawn weapons were being used by the Germans. It was clearly evident why we had seen so many dead horses and damaged small carts as we advanced through France the last weeks.'* (Edsall, p. 89)

'I was searched again at Forback where they took my watch, what little money I had, and my identification, giving me a receipt of sorts for all of them. I shared a cell with Lt. Drake and we rested once more on plain boards, spending a cold night next to a cell full of Italians. They were also prisoners and were probably used for labor in this area. As I lay there, I remember thinking I had seen better behavior and conditions in pig pens back home. They had absolutely no pride or morals. To compound the cold and disturbing conditions, there was no food that night.' (Edsall, p. 89)

The following day they were fed some bread and meat and loaded into boxcars. Like those of American POWs before them, Lester's group was packed in (five officers and 100 enlisted men) with no straw or floor coverings. Through the side boards (which allowed cold air to whistle around the car) they could see the destruction of Koblenz caused by American bombers. Some food was offered but the crowded conditions did not encourage rest—much less sleep.

By November 17, they arrived at Limburg and spent the night in boxcars before being marched the next morning to Stalag XIIA located nearby.

'Stalags were generally for enlisted personnel. Stalag Lufts were for air corps personnel. Dulags were air force transient camps. And Oflags were for ground force officers. Then, they had a farm system for enlisted men who worked in small units throughout the country. Stalag XIIA must have been a sort of receiving, processing, and distributing camp because officers and enlisted men were still together here, and they seemed to be from units all along the front.' (Edsall, pp. 89 - 90)

Upon arrival at Stalag XIIA, the POWs were searched again and deloused (body and clothes treated separately) by a powder product. Given a weak soup referred to as 'grass soup' or 'once over the meadow lightly', they were next treated to separate contents from Red Cross parcels. Meat items were turned over to the kitchen detail which also offered G.I. coffee. Of course, the barter system, "I'll trade you A for B", was popular, '*as each tried to upgrade his ration to suit his taste.'* Coal rations were used to heat the soup, leaving the barracks cold, so most slept in their clothes. Processing and final destinations for this group continued for days. They were issued postal cards (example below) which notified family member concerning their location, etc. Lt. Edsall was also issued his POW number, enlisted number, officer number, and social security number—a fairly new item at the time. (Edsall, pp. 89 – 92)

Note: A copy of a communication sent to Mrs. Lester Edsall (with her address) contained the following information:

Prisoner of War Camp

XIIA November 23, 1944

I have been taken prisoner of war in Germany. I am in good health.

We will be transported from here to another Camp within the next few days. Please don't write until I give new address.

Kindest Regards

Lester K. Edsall

1st Lt.

This postcard was sent from Limburg announcing my capture.

Sent November 23 (1944) and received February 28 (1945)

Uncertain about their futures, the barracks became *'chaotic and disorganized. Rations were unpredictable and the soup seemed to be getting better as hunger increased each day. Ten cigarettes were allotted every other day, and I passed mine on to some of my men who smoked. An enlisted man, whose father was a minister, conducted church services on Sunday. Much time was spent in bed where I read the New Testament I had always carried. Bed was the only place where we could keep warm. German food was very poor and scarce. My Thanksgiving Day dinner was a small can of pate from a parcel. The next day I got a half D bar and spent most of the day in bed reading the Testament. [A German doctor checked my wounded cheek and] said it was coming along nicely.'* (Edsall, p. 93)

'Late in the afternoon of November 25, Lt. Hunker and I were taken to a nearby castle, Diez, for interrogation. Twelve days had passed since our capture and I can't imagine why we should be questioned at this late date. If they were able to get any information from us, most certainly it would be outdated by now. I had heard the derogatory terms "dumb dutch" since childhood, and I am beginning to understand this now as a reference to their seemingly illogical actions. I was a little provoked anyway because the rumor was that we were going to receive crackers and cheese that evening at XIIA. We got there after dark, but there was a meal was waiting for us. We were put in small single cells with only a small window about eight feet or so above the floor, but they were heated rooms to the extent that the chill was taken off the room. The days were spent in solitary confinement and we saw no one, not even the guard with our food. The meals were better than I had at XIIA. Breakfast was ersatz, sour bread, and jam. Lunch was soup and supper was soup and ersatz. I read my Testament a lot, not in serious interpretative way but just to pass the time. After all the confusion of XIIA, it was really lonely here.

> *There was much time to give attention and thought as to why you were in solitary and to try to soothe that nagging concern of being singled out for this special attention.*' (Edsall, pp. 93 – 94)

Lester also comments on repeated dot patterns on the walls with various calculations added. He also spent time looking out the window into a central courtyard.

> '*Occasionally, Lt. Hunter and I would talk across the corridor, although we were not supposed to. I learned that he had been interrogated and was issued a Red Cross parcel afterward.'* (Edsall, p. 94)

Edsall's interrogation occurred the next day by a smiling, friendly officer who spoke excellent English and claimed to be graduate of the University of New York. Lester surmised that this might be true, but this "comrade" approach only stiffened his resolve to give only name, rank and serial number, even when "spy" threats were implied.

> *'Having been taken in battle in regulation uniform, I just didn't fit the threat he was trying to make. He did, however, have a most accurate list of the commanding officers of the 104th Infantry. He had a good record of all the moves and dates of moves we had made from the time we were activated in the states until the present time. Evidently, not all had given just their name, rank and serial number. I made no comments on this information he presented, but he must have read a certain astonishment in my face as he read names and places. He then asked one question about our reason for using the phosphorous artillery shell, indicating that they really hated them. My answer only repeated what he already knew—they were shells used to mark and adjust artillery impact. If Hunker acted as I did, and I am sure he did, these interrogations had to be a flop by any standard. Nevertheless, I was issued a parcel and taken back to my cell where I ate the candy immediately.'* (Edsall, p. 95)

Returned to his room and realizing that Lt. Hunker had been returned to the Stalag, Edsall read a message on his walls, which like the dots, had also been left by previous occupants: *"Be not dismayed, solitude brings greater joy at liberation."* His departure to the Stalag occurred November 29 in the afternoon. Noting that the barracks had adopted a come-and-go atmosphere, Edsall decided to restore some order; he played and observed some card and crap games, enjoyed with others an evening planned by Lt. Hunker, and conducted a church service on Sunday. (Edsall, p. 95)

Changes of camps were inevitable as proven by the movement of Lts. Hunker, Watt, Dooley and Edsall to the train station in Limburg. Fortunately, they

boarded not another boxcar, but a passenger train until they arrived near midnight at the Dulag Luft near Wetzler.

Their treatment there was luxurious, compared to previous places, which made them both suspicious and grateful: large, heated two-man rooms with proper dining and warm meals; beds with linens and furniture. The next morning, Edsall was even invited to take a walk through the woods with a Lt. Burninghouse. The conversation was casual—very little about the war. Returning to his room, he read, washed clothes and slept. The food was more than sufficient and much better than Limburg: soup and ersatz coffee, potatoes or cabbage with meat and bread. A similar walk with another German officer, Lt. Kirner, took place and mirrored the same conversation.

> *'I still cannot understand why they went to all this trouble on our behalf and apparently with no motive behind it. We never tried to discover if our room was bugged, so we'll never know. As far as we could see, it just turned out to be a short, pleasant vacation for the four of us. We were taken back to Limburg on December 7, having experienced another one of those "dumb dutch" actions.'* (Edsall, p. 97)

> *'During the night, a town or target nearby was really clobbered. The flash and sound of the exploding bombs, searchlights and the anti-aircraft fire was a fascinating show. Frankfurt was about 30 miles south of us and this was very near, so I do not believe it was Frankfurt. Maybe Wetzler was a rail center or supply center and a valid target. The guards all ran to shelters, so we guessed that we must have been next door to the raid.'* (Edsall, pp. 96 - 97)

> *'Finally on December 8, orders came for 45 officers to be transferred to Altburgund (or Schubin), Poland, where there was a ground force officers' camp called Oflag 64. We were able to shower and clean up and were then "loaded" into a small boxcar. Actually, there were two cars and twenty-three of us were put into less than one half of a boxcar. The cars were divided by a wire barrier going from the edge of the sliding side door to the opposite side of the car. This allowed the guards to travel along with us and they were free to exit and enter the car at will [without worrying about any of us escaping]. We boarded the train about 5 p.m. and of course, we sat in the boxcar for over fifty hours before we were picked up by an engine and started moving.—We moved very slowly but fairly steady all night, and when daylight came, we found we were stopped in the rail yards at Frankfurt. We sat there until noon when a target about 500 yards away was bombed.'* (Edsall, p. 97)

Edsall believed that the bombing was carried out by fighters or attack bombers. Realizing that their boxcars were locked (the guards ran for

shelters), they hoped their cars were marked with insignia which would distinguish them from being military transport. Their luck held as the nearest one landed about 200 yards away. They continued to sit in the yard for over 40 hours before moving to Vorbiel Nord where they waited again until December 13, then moving toward Berlin, noting the names of towns through boxcar board cracks. No food was offered on the morning of the 15th, but they received some bread and smelly cheese at Frankenberg. Stopping again on December 16th, the non-commissioned officers were left there as the train continued. Chilled and feeling the effects of low morale, they sang Christmas carols and thought about happier times. Edsall remembers that the bullet in his cheek '*worked itself out.'* He kept the copper jacket tip. (Edsall, pp. 99 – 100)

'FINALLY, WE CAME TO ALTBURGUND LATE ON DECEMBER 17'

> *'After staying in our boxcars overnight at the station, we were marched through the town Shubin, arriving at Oflag 64 about 8 a.m. We were received in the recreation building and issued coffee, potatoes and gravy. Later, we got soup and one third of a Red Cross parcel for lunch and spuds for supper. Later that evening we were deloused once more, given a parcel, and taken to our assigned barracks. Mine was 2B cubicle 12. We must have been a sorry looking bunch having been through such an ordeal under such trying circumstances with very little food and no sanitary conditions.'* (Edsall, p. 100)

Bunk bed arrangements were standard with little storage space available. Lt. Castle was the cubicle commander; Lester's mates were Lts. Piecuch, Krall, Teel, Baker, Gann—a diverse group from different states. The posted schedule added structure to their day-to-day existence: *'awakened at 7:40, Appell at 8:00, hot water at 8:15, lunch at 12:30, Appell at 4:00, supper at 6:00, and lights out at 10:30.' (Edsall, p. 100)*

> *'Christmas Red Cross parcels were passed out on December 20. My parcel contained a can of plum pudding, a small can of turkey, honey, butter, tea, nuts, candy, Vienna sausage, deviled ham, two fruit bars, three packets chewing gum, wash cloth, pipe and Prince Albert tobacco, three packs of cigarettes, dates, cherries, bouillon cubes, and jam.—I would learn later about the value of tobacco as trading material. These were different parcels from the regular ones. The regulars, generally speaking, contained powdered milk, sugar cubes, two chocolate "D" bars, meat (salmon or corned beef which was taken from each parcel and given to the kitchen), pate, biscuits, box fruit, cigarettes, coffee, vitamin C tablets, cheese, jam, and oleo.'* (Edsall, p. 100, 104)

Edsall's writings about camp routines and activities reflected a web of memories by the Kriegies at Oflag 64: cold winter days, YMCA contributions, Christmas Day programs and church services, mail delivery by neutral Red Cross members who traveled from camp to camp, and the special Christmas meal; he had drawn the one at 3 p.m. *'where I prepared a special dinner of my own from my parcel using small servings to tide me over to the middle of the afternoon, [plus the foods shared by everyone]. The servings were small but you could not beat the variety. We were served scotch broth, mashed potatoes, meat hash, gravy, American coffee, and cabbage salad.'* (Edsall, p. 104, 105)

Meals were lean after the 25th—insufficient nutrition for 1400 men. Later he weighed in at only 143 pounds. Edsall next writes about the radios which were hidden throughout the camp. These reports kept POWs updated about the war. Since Edsall's group were late commers, camp information was selective until their true identities were validated. *'From the newscast, we would spend hours each day talking about the possibilities and probabilities of the Russian offensive and the Battle of the Bulge.'* (Edsall, p. 105 and Black, pp. 154, 155))

Edsall's routine included his attendance at services conducted by Lt. Karnes and his reading and writing to family. During this time, an event caused concern:

> '*The middle of the night we were roused out to be deloused again. There was no logical reasoning to the Germans' behavior. Had we known how some of the delousing rooms were being used in some camps in Germany to gas and kill Jews and other prisoners, we might have been more apprehensive about going into those rooms each time.'* (Edsall, p. 108)
>
> *'A new group of prisoners arrived New Years Day. They told of a direct hit on the very building I had been held in in Limburg. Evidently, because of the crowding and large numbers passing through this camp, there were many killed. It is sad to have survived combat and then die like this.'* (Edsall, p. 108)

Later, he learned about an unscheduled Appell at Oflag 64 (before he arrived) in which the barracks were searched for uniforms; this action caused the men to wear everything they owned when called out. Could this be the reason for the earlier delousing—cleaner uniforms for infiltration tactics at the Battle of the Bulge?

> *'I remembered my wife's birthday on January 8, but this time I could do nothing for her. For our anniversary on November 2, I had sent all the American money I had (which wasn't much) a month or so beforehand to Smith's Greenhouse in Piqua instructing them to send flowers for our anniversary. They were very*

gracious, and I have always been grateful to them for that. Now, I couldn't even send a card or letter.' (Edsall, pp. 108, 109)

More integrated into camp activities now, Edsall attended church services regularly, saw a variety show, learned about contact bridge and made preparations to start classes in French and shorthand. During their regular Saturday inspection on January 20, 1945, however, an announcement was delivered which would alter their lives as stationary POWs and challenge each man's endurance to the extreme. (Edsall, p. 109)

THE LONG MARCH

Senior officers stood with the men in the cold and told them to prepare for a foot march of indetermined length—no vehicle transportation would be provided. Some who were truly ill or unable to walk would be left behind in a hospital setting. Returning to their barracks and beginning the process of gathering clothes, souvenirs, food parcels and other items which made their lives bearable, some acted alone while others partnered to pack and use a small sled on the icy roads. Beginning the march in the worst weather in 50 years, 1300 men and their guards exited the main camp gate around 10 a.m. on January 21, 1945. Edsall's diary stated that he wore two shirts and two pairs of pants with extra socks in his helmet to keep them dry—lessons learned about the dangers of trench foot were more important than ever. He carried two blankets, a parcel and extra clothing—a heavy pack but a vital one. (Edsall, p. 109)

The first day they marched 21 kilometers through Exin, stopping at a farm with large barns located on the Schneideberg Road. Divided into groups and assigned barns, six men with Edsall shared a stall with five calves. Luckily, the calves were fairly gentle and after the men had endured slippery, snowy roads, the men were able to rest and keep warm. Since no nourishment was offered by the guards, those who had food started to dig into their supplies.

> January 22 arrived early. *'Many found that they were unable to go on. I think they were taken back to Oflag 64. Lt. Plants of Columbus, Ohio, recorded in his diary that 130 weak and sick fell by the roadside the first day, 90 dropped out the second day and 50 the third. The rest of us started out about 8:30 toward Wertsitz. Since I had not been a prisoner very long, I was still pretty strong and in relatively good shape. I tried to stay close to the head of the column.—[The guards] were pretty cruel trying to prod and intimidate the stragglers to keep moving, and using gun butts to batter them, and threats of shooting them.'*
>
> *'The roads were crowded with German refugees fleeing westward toward their homeland, Germany. Some pulled carts, if possible, but most were carrying their worldly goods on their backs, just as*

we were. Poles were being herded along too. Possibly against their will or perhaps it was some who had fraternized with the Germans and were fleeing their own countrymen. It was, indeed, a strange, sad sight with plump housewives, older males puffing mightily under their loads, and uniformed older men who might have been minor political appointees back in the places they had just left. All these, along with our 1000 or more officers, must have indeed looked (as Lt. Plants suggested) like the winter march scene from the movie, "Dr. Zhivago". That day while walking through snow flurries, we crossed the Bromberg Canal. All day, at times seeming close, we could hear heavy artillery to our rear, and the guards kept looking back over their shoulders a lot. Somewhere the Germans found some margarine, and we were issued one third pound as our entire food ration for the day.' (Edsall, p. 110)

This day's march covered 23 kilometers. Camped near a small town, Eichfelde, Edsall remembers that his stall-mate was a colt—obviously nervous and restless—which kept both awake. This is why he was alert when the guards left around 4 a.m. He heard arms fire close by and thought about being free to escape, but the guards returned about noon—a disappointment to all.

'However, while the guards were gone, we had hot water that morning and a hog was butchered to be used for that evening's meal. I suppose the butchering was done by American initiative because we had become opportunists and survivors and very flexible in adapting to a situation. With the return of the guards, preparations were made to move out immediately. I whacked off some meat from the carcass for myself. I found something that looked like whole wheat flour which probably was bran for the livestock, but if it was good for them, it probably would be good for me, too. Six of us found a small sled and confiscated it and loaded our belongings on it, and moved out at 3:30 p.m. [The next stop was only 7 kms away at a town called Charlottenburg]. We were in a stall again, but this time we turned the horse out and had the stall to ourselves.' (Edsall, p. 111)

'The six of us on the sled, Watts, Stone, Burns, Davis, Ramsberg, and myself, found this a fairly good idea, taking turns pushing and pulling the sled. The going was fairly easy as we left at 9:30 a.m. and getting to Lobsens about noon. The citizens watched quietly and with curiosity as we walked by. They passed out little pieces of bread and butter, cheese, small delicious cookies and ersatz. The gesture was magnified when one considered the fact that they didn't have anything to spare. We stayed in barns outside of town where I took the opportunity to fry up some of the pork for future consumption on the march. This was done by using a long stick

and holding the meat close to the open fire where they were heating the soup, just as we used to toast marshmallows. Our issue this day was pea soup and almost a half loaf of bread.' (Edsall, p. 111)

Edsall's accounting of the day-after-day occurrences included the towns they passed or marched through, artillery heard in the distances, meager meals acquired (often by guards who gathered what was available), the desolation which occurs in wars, and the never-ending harsh weather in which more marchers, depleted of strength and will, were unable to travel another km—much less another day. Edsall recalled that his feet became so frozen that he covered his boots with pork fat, a technique which had negative returns.

'The Germans notified our commander that they had acquired rail cars for 180 men who could be shipped ahead to our destination of Luckenwalde. He urged all who had a reason to go on sick call to do so. After all the sick and disabled were accommodated, there was still available space, so I got to be part of the quota. The farmer gave us a little milk that evening and about 10 p.m. we were taken by vehicle back to Ruhnow to the railroad. Forty-eight men and three guards were loaded into each of four boxcars. The guards were given one can of meat for each ten men. Already, leaving the column began to look like a bad decision. Really, I could have walked a little further.' (Edsall, p. 117)

Conditions did not improve. Food was scarce, the train schedules varied, and more men were added to already crowded boxcar conditions. Arriving in Berlin and told that no food was available, the train returned to Tempelhof…

… '*supposedly to be fed, but again there was nothing there. We picked up a different engine and moved to Luckenwalde, Stalag IIIA, arriving there at 4:20 on February 10. We detrained at 5:20 and the Feldwebel marched us to the wrong camp which was on the opposite side of town from our camp. After walking those extra kms, there was no food provided when we arrived at Luckenwalde. Instead, we waited and waited until about midnight when they started to delouse us. From there we were put in bare rooms with nothing but stone floors and walls where we stayed until about 10:30 [a.m.] when we were searched and sent to a barracks.—Soup and potatoes were our lunch. Tea, bread, and oleo were issued that evening.'* (Edsall, pp. 118, 119)

His next diary notes reflected that he was moved to a section of barracks which housed Air Force officers and settled into the same kind of routine and activities he had adopted at Oflag 64.

'The senior Allied officer in camp was a Norwegian General. A shipment of parcels had been forwarded to his men, but he gave

five hundred parcels to be shared by the 2300 Americans there.—The quantity of each item was small but certainly a welcomed treat.' (Edsall, p. 120)

'March came in like a lion. It was so cold [that] we had to stay in bed to keep warm. One of the problems this presented was that you had lots of time to think about your constant hunger and to feel sorry for yourself. The thin soup and one-seventh loaf of bread each day didn't require much mealtime, so it was back to bed again.—As close as I could tell, there must have been about 500 of Oflag 64 officers at this camp at this time. Having about 1400 back at Oflag 64 left a large number unaccounted for. It snowed often the last of February and the first days of March, and I wondered if some of us were still on the roads being shuffled along.' (Edsall, p.121)

'Everyday, food was the constant concern. My diary is filled with comments of the lack of food. Each day we were going without any rations of any kind from four o'clock in the afternoon until about 12:00 or 12:30 the next day. This was a period of about twenty hours. Even then, we would get only 500 to700 calories, total. Consequently, we accepted any possibility of receiving food with great excitement. On March 7, a rumor came down to barracks level that we would soon receive a Red Cross parcel for each two men. We got oatmeal instead of weak tea for breakfast. The noon day soup was actually good. So far, things were going just great that day. Then we were issued one parcel per man!! The Germans also issued a sugar ration that day too. My diary noted that all I needed that day to make it [supper] was a letter from home.' (Edsall, p. 122)

'A few days later, the Norwegians gave us some of their Swedish parcels—[divided among seven men]. These were a little different and contained two kinds of bread, goose berry jam, cube sugar, powdered milk, two large cans of fresh cooked sausage, sardines, matches, a small porcelain cup, soap, a small spoon, and a can opener. I won the spoon by drawing cards and promptly traded it for two rations of goose berry jam.' (Edsall, p. 122)

'Several days later, we received another of our parcels. We were leaning heavily on these issues now because German issue was scarce (and tasteless when available), and even hot water was often not provided.—About the middle of March, a shipment of parcels must have gotten through to us, and our Senior American Officer announced to us that we had 157,000 and would receive one every five days.—[Germany] was really hurting, and now the

prisoner would be eating better than the captor. Ironic!' (Edsall, p. 123)

'Overall, the Norwegians seem to be the best of all the nationalities in the camp. We were in country groups. We could visit back and forth, so we got to know each other slightly. The Poles had been incarcerated and persecuted so long that they were suspicious of everyone and had forgotten how to say thanks. The Italians were a crude, vulgar lot and reinforced the observation I had made at an earlier time in my captivity. The French could not be trusted and tried to assume the martyr role in the war. The British could trick you out of your shirt and often did. The Canadians were OK, but [their numbers were few]. Fortunately, we didn't have to mingle much, so there were no serious problems between groups.' (Edsall, p. 123)

Staying busy with chores like washing and mending clothes kept the men focused. Some, like Edsall, began to find their clothes fitting snugly—a sure sign that they had eaten better and more often. When spring arrived, the barracks spilled outdoors for time in the sunshine. Lester and his new friend, Lt. Weber, traded ideas about future plans and remained good friends (wives included) for many years. Warmer weather also encouraged outdoor sports and decent water temperatures for bathing and shaving. Edsall made a note about seeing and talking with his N.C.O.s.

'They were faring about like everyone else. There had been rumors for some time that we might be moved, and we were sweating it out each day. Evidently, the rumors concerned the British because they moved out on April 12.' (Edsall, p. 126, 127)

'American fighter planes were spotted overhead one day. These were the first we had seen for a long time, and we were encouraged because they were usually close support units, rather than long range and meant the Allied troops were getting close.' (Edsall, p. 127)

'The radio (which was carried from Oflag 64 by some of our courageous officers) and which we had secreted in camp, reported the death of President Roosevelt—a sobering effect on us because we still had confidence in his leadership. We would not learn of the concessions he made at his meetings with Stalin at Yalta, concessions that would haunt us for many, many years. The church service that Sunday, in remembrance of Roosevelt, was very impressive. We had already had our emotions stimulated the night before with a dazzling display. We were approximately thirty miles, give or take a mile, south of Berlin, and had often watched the night bombings of that city. On this Saturday night, a tremendous bombing raid was directed on southern Berlin or

some target further south.—We could see everything—searchlights, flares, bursting bombs, ack-ack, fires, and planes going down in flames. It was a brutal softening up of the area, and we speculated on ground troops arriving here by the following Tuesday at the latest. That Monday, many German fighter planes were flying overhead, and we felt that we would soon be in the thick of the battle. Actually, things quieted down for a few days, though.' (Edsall, 127)

April 20 was Hitler's birthday—a quiet day in the camp. Discussions often included guards—many of whom were older, having served in WWI, and still serving as privates. Perhaps, it was thought, they would display more tolerance for the POWs than the younger fanatics would have demonstrated. The Russians were close and German aircraft were flying low over the camp.

'The thought of being free was a wonderful feeling—never again would that precious word be taken lightly by any of us, and especially by those who had been prisoners for years and had survived this long and trying ordeal.' (Edsall, p. 128)

THE RUSSIANS ARRIVE

The Russians avoided their camp initially but surrounded the town, sending in a column the next day. Skirmishes between the Germans and the Russians could be heard as their camp guards fled, perhaps to reinvent themselves as civilians.

'There was no longer a camp authority, and an uneasy feeling blanketed the camp, as if trouble might yet erupt and freedom denied.' (Edsall, p. 129)

Called to reveille the next morning, camp occupants were fed soup, bread and butter and later one fourth of a Canadian parcel. It appeared that the senior officers had decided to remain at the camp for the present time. By April 28, men were beginning to disappear, and all becoming restless—waiting for something to happen. Several officers in presentable uniforms, including Lt. Edsall, were chosen to walk the streets of Luckenwalde as symbols of law and order. Most inhabitants stayed indoors, though a few women and children made an appearance. '*Our radio had kept us informed and I knew that the Allied forces had been ordered to stop at the Elbe River.'* This of course, was not good news for the locals. (Edsall, p. 130)

'*I was on a busy corner on the main northerly street through town. There was a steady stream of military equipment and troops moving north through town and just about every piece was American made. This was my introduction to the extent of the lend-lease agreement with the Russians. What an erroneous*

description of the agreement that turned out to be. This was actually gift equipment passing by for I am sure they never intended to honor their war debt from the very beginning.' (Edsall, p. 130)

'Luckenwalde was in the Russian line of advance. All this material and equipment was to be used in the southerly assault on Berlin and was being funneled through town, past me. Some of the Russian combat troops were female—robust and arrogant as the males, sitting on tanks and half-tracks with arms folded defiantly and intimidating smirks on their faces. A few waved, but most ignored us as they passed. I recall wondering at the time, "Are these our friends?" How prophetic the thought was because in the years since, it became clear that while they were allies, they were never our friends.'

'Moving in the opposite direction through town was a line of German soldier prisoners. What a bedraggled lot they were. They had been awfully busy the last few days fighting and defending themselves. Their uniforms were dirty and wrinkled. All were unshaven and unwashed and all had the beaten, subdued, slumping look, with that look of fear in their eyes. Many were only fifteen or sixteen years old from their appearance. They were probably Hitler youth who had been duped into fighting for the fatherland. This day in Luckenwalde was a very depressing day, but I appreciated the opportunity to have witnessed this drama. The incidents and faces are etched in my mind forever.' (Edsall, p. 131)

ESCAPE IS ONLY A BRIDGE AWAY

'With the coming of the new month, May, also came rumors that we would be moved to another camp a couple miles away. There was still much fighting all around camp and in town. I was supposed to go on patrol again the following day, but it evidently was considered too risky since so many Russians had moved into the area. A stray shell landed in our sports plaza in the center of camp. I followed orders about staying in camp, all the while, questioning those orders in my mind. Some of the men were leaving daily, and I'm aware of their leaving as I read my Aesop's Fables book (a book I had carried from the library of Oflag 64 and still have). I nap occasionally to catch up on my sleep, and all the while, wrestling with my feelings and doubts.' (Edsall, p. 131)

'Word was received by radio that seventy trucks were coming from the American lines to pick us up. A few trucks arrived early on

May 6 but were sent back by the Russians. There was nothing the drivers could say or do because they were not supposed to be on this side of the Elbe anyway. Realizing that they were going to lose the camp occupants, Russian armed guards were placed around the perimeter.'

'These two events were the last straws as long as I was concerned. It was quite clear in my mind of the intentions and character of our so-called "friends", so I decided to escape. [Restricted to the camp, we were also treated as prisoners by the Russians.] I carefully watched the routine of the guards for a while and decided on the time of the attempt. I, also, wanted to be one of the first to try because I was sure that after a few attempts, the guards would become much more alert and hard to fool. [Choosing my time carefully], I slipped out of the camp to the nearest cover. The Russians guards were definitely instructed to prevent us from leaving because I was fired at by automatic weapons. Luckily, I escaped being hit, but I know they had every intention of stopping us, one way or the other.—I do not know how many were still in camp but learned later that many Americans were repatriated though Russia.'

'I quickly headed in a westerly direction along country roads trying to avoid main highways.—In time, small groups of us had drifted together, so we traveled in small units. We hid from anything moving on wheels because about the only one on wheels was the German or Russian military—After quite a few miles, we finally came upon some familiar vehicles with drivers in uniforms we recognized as American. They were searching with binoculars and waiting uneasily for the arrival of any ex-prisoners always watching for the approach of any German or Russian Soldiers.' (Edsall, p. 132)

'So, the feeling of anxiety remained until the trucks returned back across the pontoon bridge on the Elbe, and we were once again under Allied control. The cheers must have echoed up and down the river as we released our tensions and feelings. Tears of joy streamed down our faces as we realized the feeling of liberation and freedom. Never again would any of us be complacent about the wonderful word, "freedom".' (Edsall, p. 133 and Meltesen, p. 240)

LIBERTY, SWEET LIBERTY

'I enjoyed the luxury of the canvas cot that night and it felt great. Breakfast was almost like being home—grapefruit juice, oatmeal

and milk, white bread and jam, bacon and good coffee. This stop was at Schonebeck, and we were moved to Hildesheim the next day where we were deloused. Then we were loaded on a C-47 and were flown at tree top level to Nancy. Having one's first airplane ride in a C-47 is not recommended, particularly if piloted by a frustrated 2nd Lt. Cowboy. A truck took us through Nancy to the railroad station. On the way we met a G.I. bakery truck filled with loaves of white bread and they tossed some to us when they found out we were X-POWs.'

'This was near territory I had fought in. Familiar names could be seen through the little train windows as we passed through the little towns on the way to Espinal. This was one of our supply hubs, and I was issued a complete new G.I. uniform, PX ration, and a Red Cross kit. I recognized a soldier named Thomas from Piqua, Ohio, and also found my platoon sergeant, Morriessy. About 9 a.m. I boarded a train toward Le Havre and traveled comfortably by train to Camp Lucky Strike. The shelters in Camp Lucky Strike were fairly large size, multiple person tents arranged in large groups or sections. I also saw other soldiers [I knew there.]'

'For the next ten days, I was pampered extravagantly. Besides our regular meals, we had access to the PX and unrestricted milk shakes and other goodies. All this, along with limited amount of exercise, elevated my weight to 168 pounds—the most I had ever weighed.' (Edsall, p. 134)

'We were also questioned about our experiences of the last months. They asked for any information that might be helpful in locating and aiding other freed prisoners.' (Edsall, pp. 134, 135)

After viewing some USO shows for entertainment, Edsall reported that he *'was moved to an area designated "D" for processing and preparation for shipment home. On the 21st of May, I left Camp Lucky Strike—and was moved to a holding area about 5 kms from Le Havre. From there, I boarded a pretty nice boat named "Monticello", and we sailed the evening of the next day. We had to stop at South Hampton to take on some hospital cases—That done, we headed west, homeward bound. The accommodations in this ship were not as plush as the ones we had on the way overseas in the SS Argentina. There was no officers mess, and we slept in hammocks in tiers and ate below deck. None of this mattered though because we were headed toward the United States. The weather was pretty nice and most escaped the trial of seasickness. This time I got to see the Statue of Liberty as we passed by and it was a pretty emotional sight for those of us who had been denied liberty for a time.'* (Edsall, p. 135)

R & R AND MOVEMENT WEST TOWARD THE SOUTH PACIFIC

> *'Arriving at Camp Kilmer in New Jersey, June 3, 1945, I was immediately sent on to Camp Atterbury in Indiana. I then went home for sixty-two days for recuperation, rehabilitation, and recovery. Those summer days passed quickly because I was among friends and loved ones in an environment that I had longed for. All too soon, I had to report to the Redistribution Center on Miami Beach in Florida. One last part of the rehabilitation was a fourteen-day stay at the Albion Hotel—with my wife. and we had a glorious vacation. The highlights of our stay were a couple deep sea fishing excursions.'*
>
> *'All good things must come to an end, so we bid farewell to our new friends…and I reported to Co. 12, I.A.R.T.C., Camp Gordon, Ga. This was familiar territory for me having spent some of my state side service here with my Division. It was a short stay because orders were cut for me to report no later than September 12, 1945 to Ft. Benning, Ga. to attend Officers Basic Course #95. This course would bring us up to date on all the advancements the Army had made by trial and error at home and on the various battlefields. It was completed on or about November 10, and I returned to Camp Gordon to be promptly assigned to Company B, 130th Bn., 81st Infantry Training Regiment at Camp Joseph T. Robinson, Ark., presumably heading for duty in the Pacific area.'* (Edsall, p. 136)

Lester and his family arrived there on November 15, 1945; fortunately, the war ended in the Pacific before he was required to deploy. Since he felt that the job for which he had been drafted was now complete, Edsall made the decision to leave the service. He cleared Camp Robinson on November 27 and returned home through Camp Atterbury in Indiana.

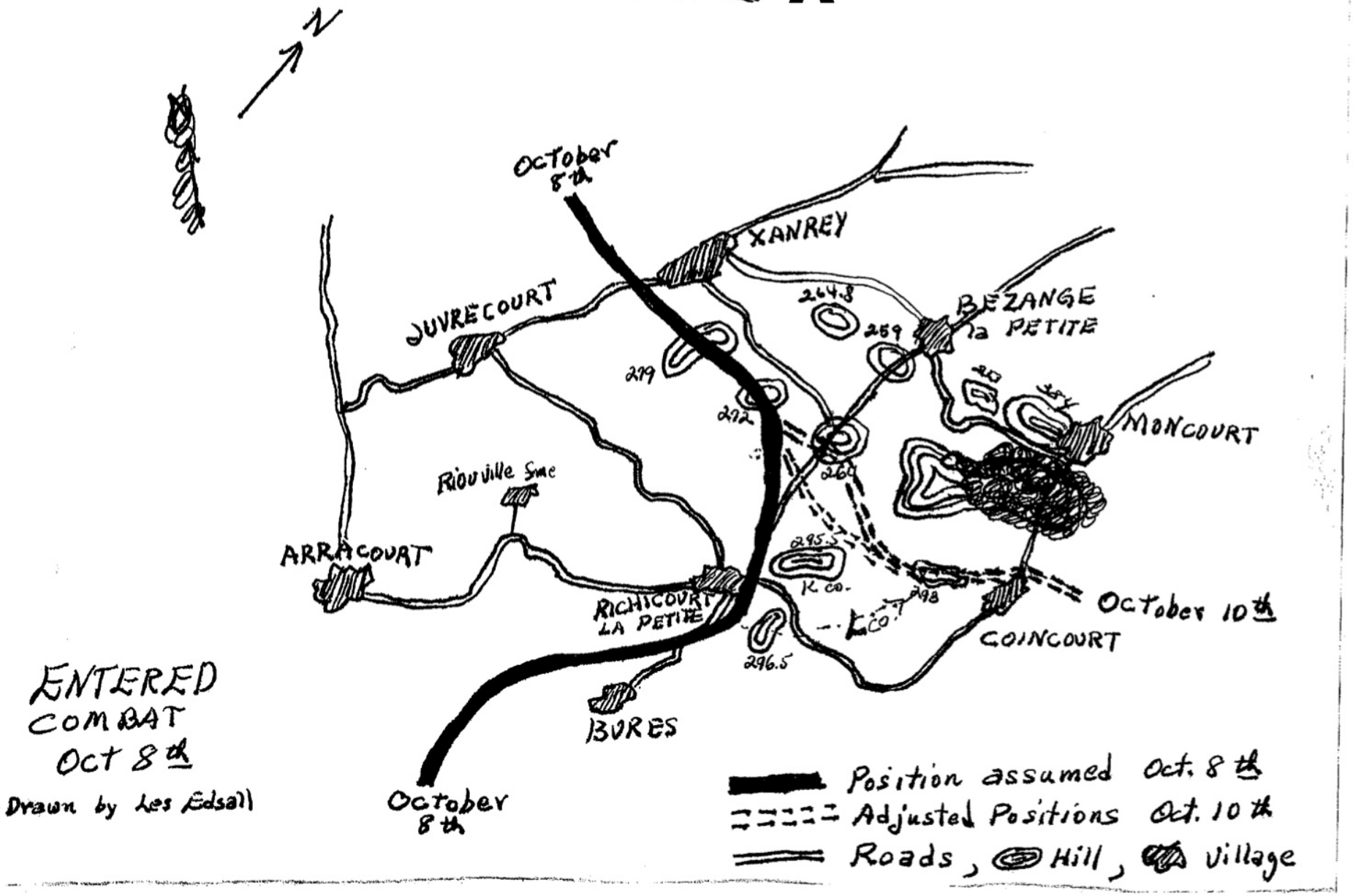
> *'I had accumulated two months and nine days leave and was given four days traveling time to return home. This terminal leave time expired on February 12, 1946. Meantime, my promotion to Captain came through and I was separated as Captain L.K. Edsall even though I would never have a command with that rank.'* (Edsall, p. 137)
>
> *'As an officer, you were automatically commissioned as a reserve officer upon separation. I reluctantly tolerated this until I was able to negotiate a transfer to inactive reserve on October 6, 1949. Then, in December of 1952, a directory of the President appointed me as a reserved officer in the Reserve Corps Army of the United States. This finally suited me and I knew it was over at last.'* (Edsall, p. 137)

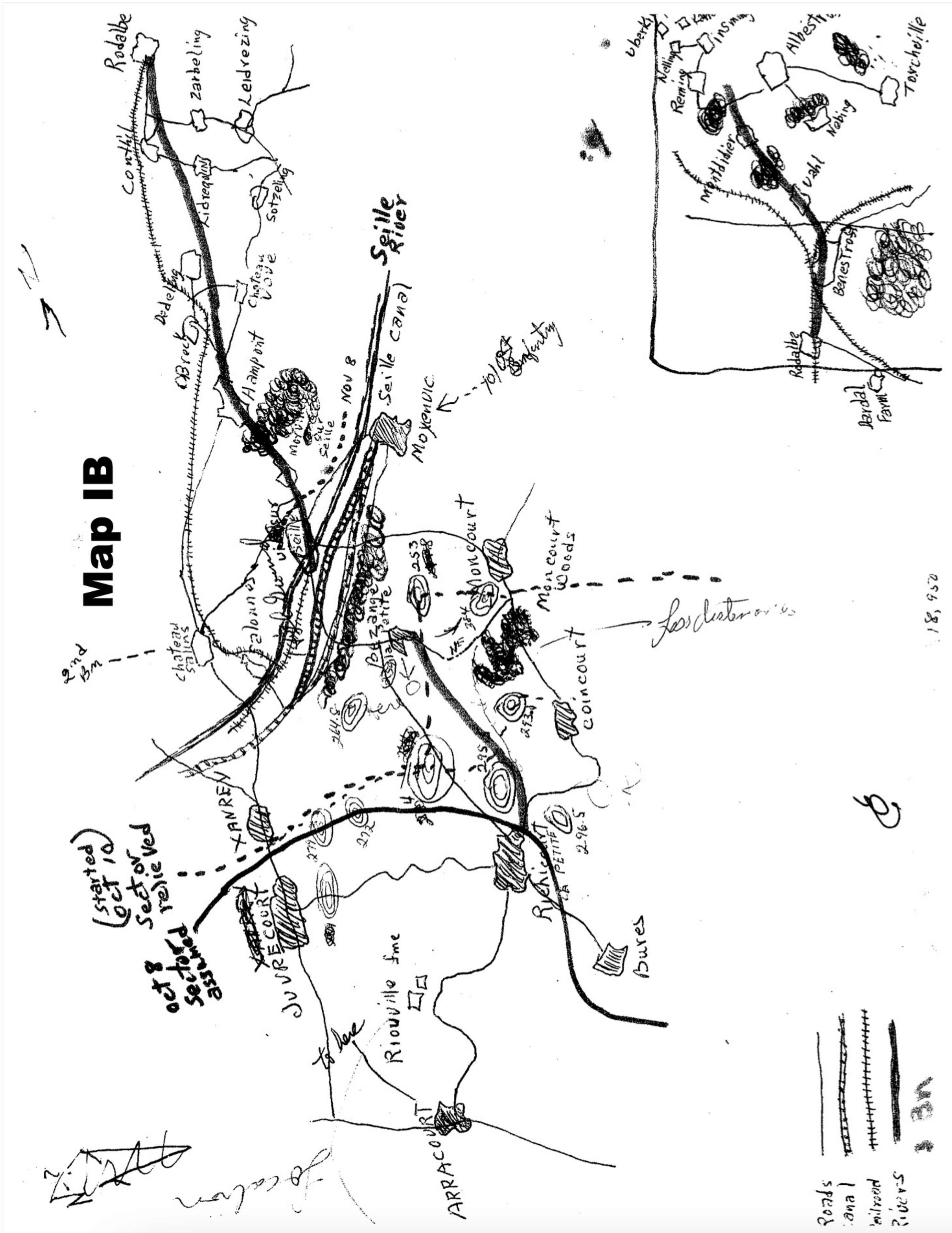
FINAL THOUGHTS

> *'One last word about this period in my life. I was the only person in this area who served in the 26th division. Therefore, I had no one to talk with and rehash the experiences of those times, and for many years afterward, I rarely thought about them. Through a series of events, I have once more made contact with my regiment and fellow POWs. Each contact will renew or recall some incident that has dimmed or was even forgotten as the years passed. There is no adverse feeling in my mind about being captured.'*
>
> *'I can now enjoy the love and friendship of those I fought and served with, and those I struggled along side in the POW experiences. I never really developed a hatred for the German people. In fact, a desire was sparkled within me to someday return there with my wife to show her some of the country that was so much struggle for me. That wish has been fulfilled a couple times.'*
>
> *'I wanted to tell of my life as a soldier, especially to my children and their children. I am proud of my service to my country and my military friends. I was no hero but…I had some trying times, some good experiences, and some close calls. So just like each of millions who served, I, too, have a story to relate.'* (Edsall, pp. 137 – 138)

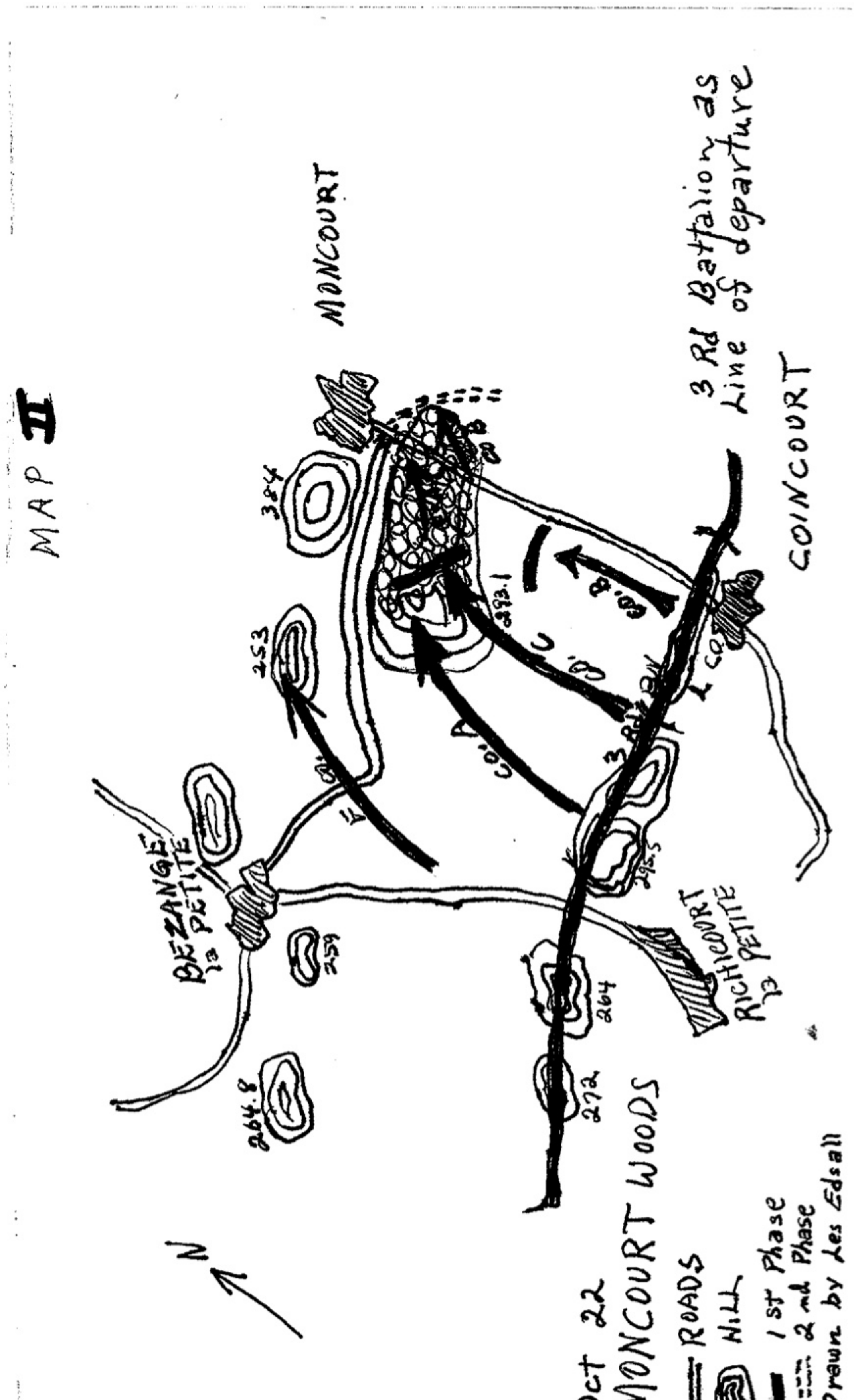
Lester's hand-drawn combat maps, referred to in the text, follow on the next seven pages.

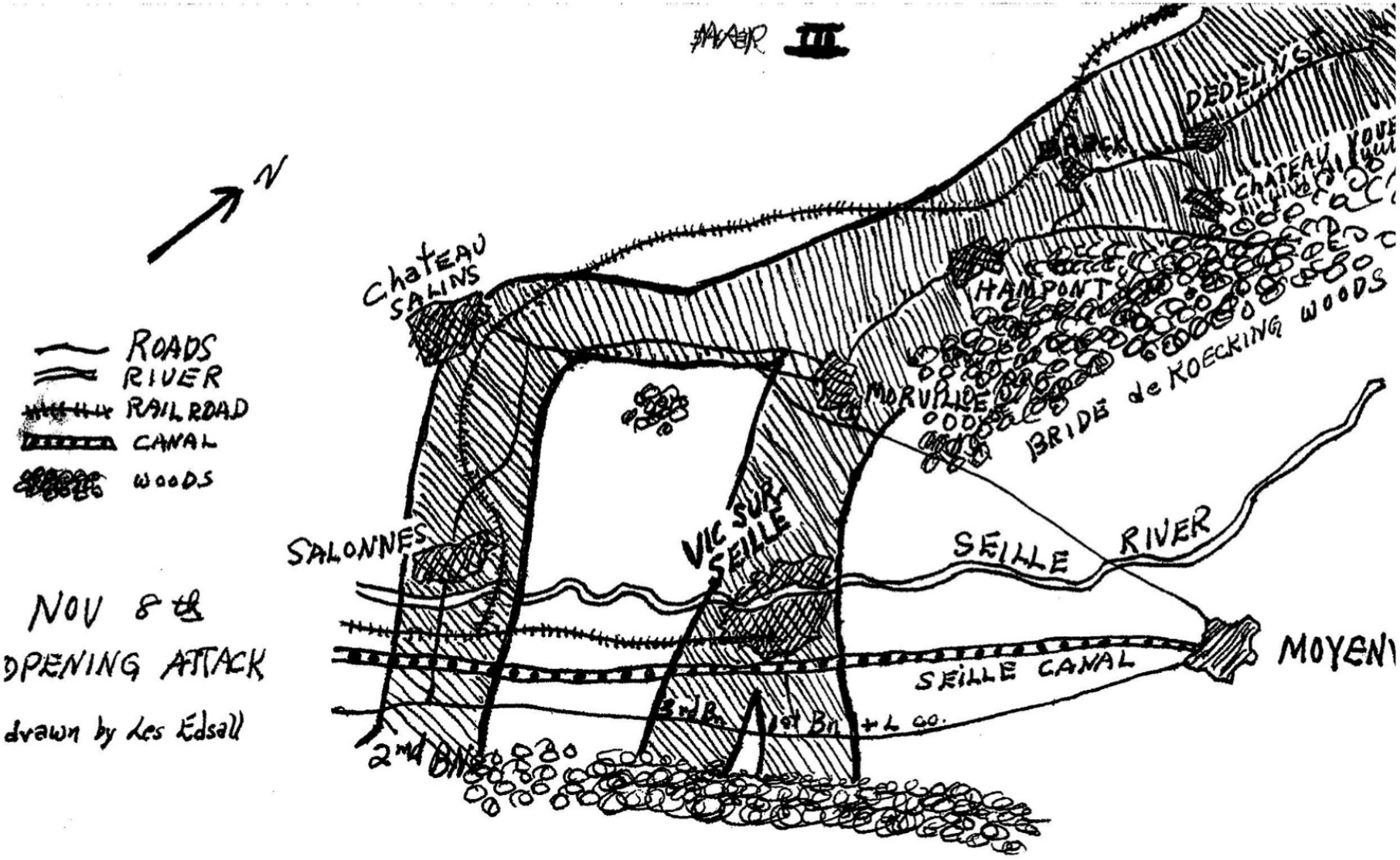
MAP I A

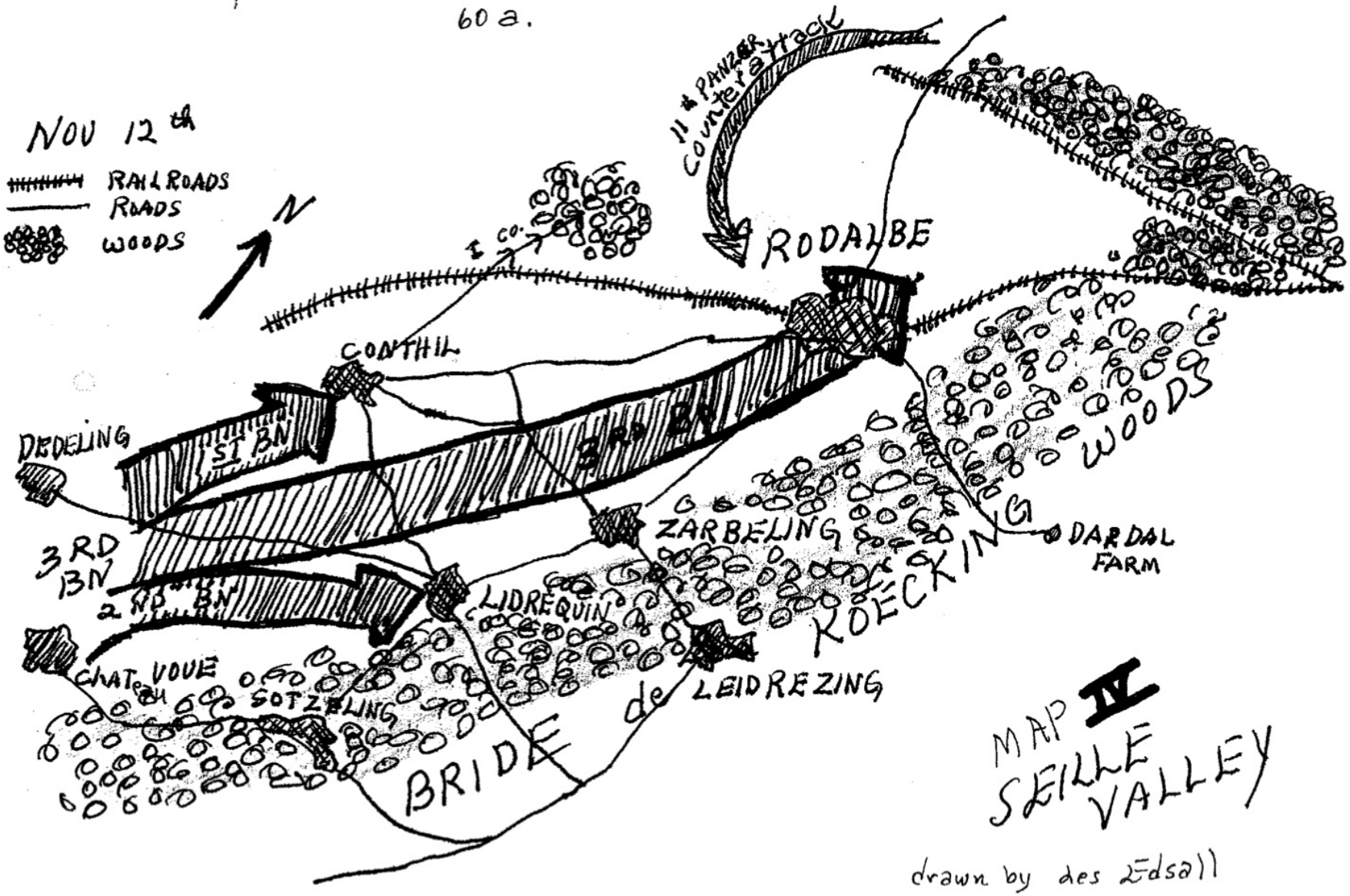

N
October 8th
XANREY
JUVRECOURT
264.8
259
BEZANGE la PETITE
279
272
MONCOURT
Rioville Sme
260
ARRACOURT
295.5
K CO.
298
L CO.
October 10th
RICHICOURT LA PETITE
COINCOURT
296.5
BURES
October 8th
ENTERED COMBAT Oct 8th
Drawn by Les Edsall
Position assumed Oct. 8th
Adjusted Positions Oct. 10th
Roads, Hill, Village

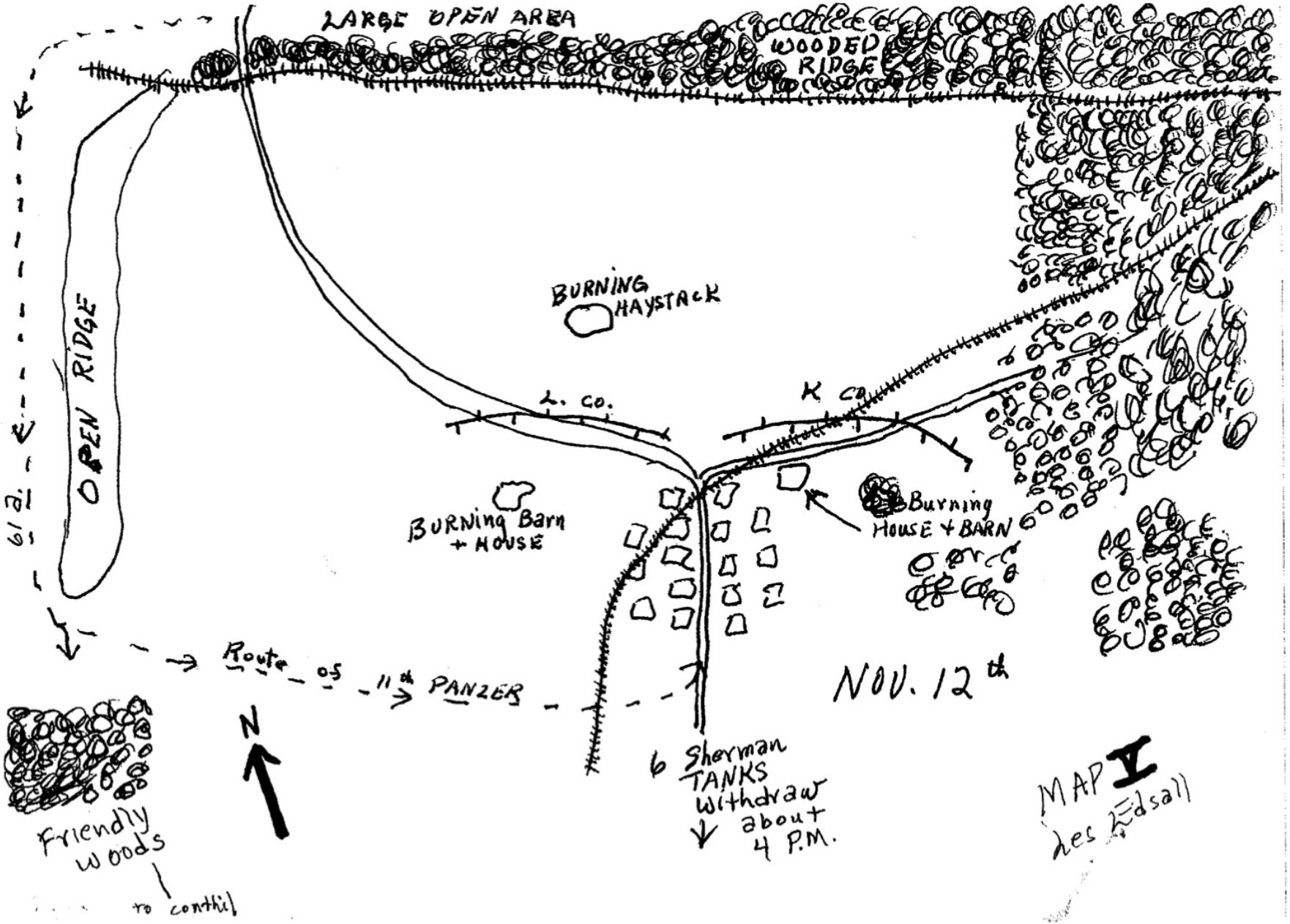


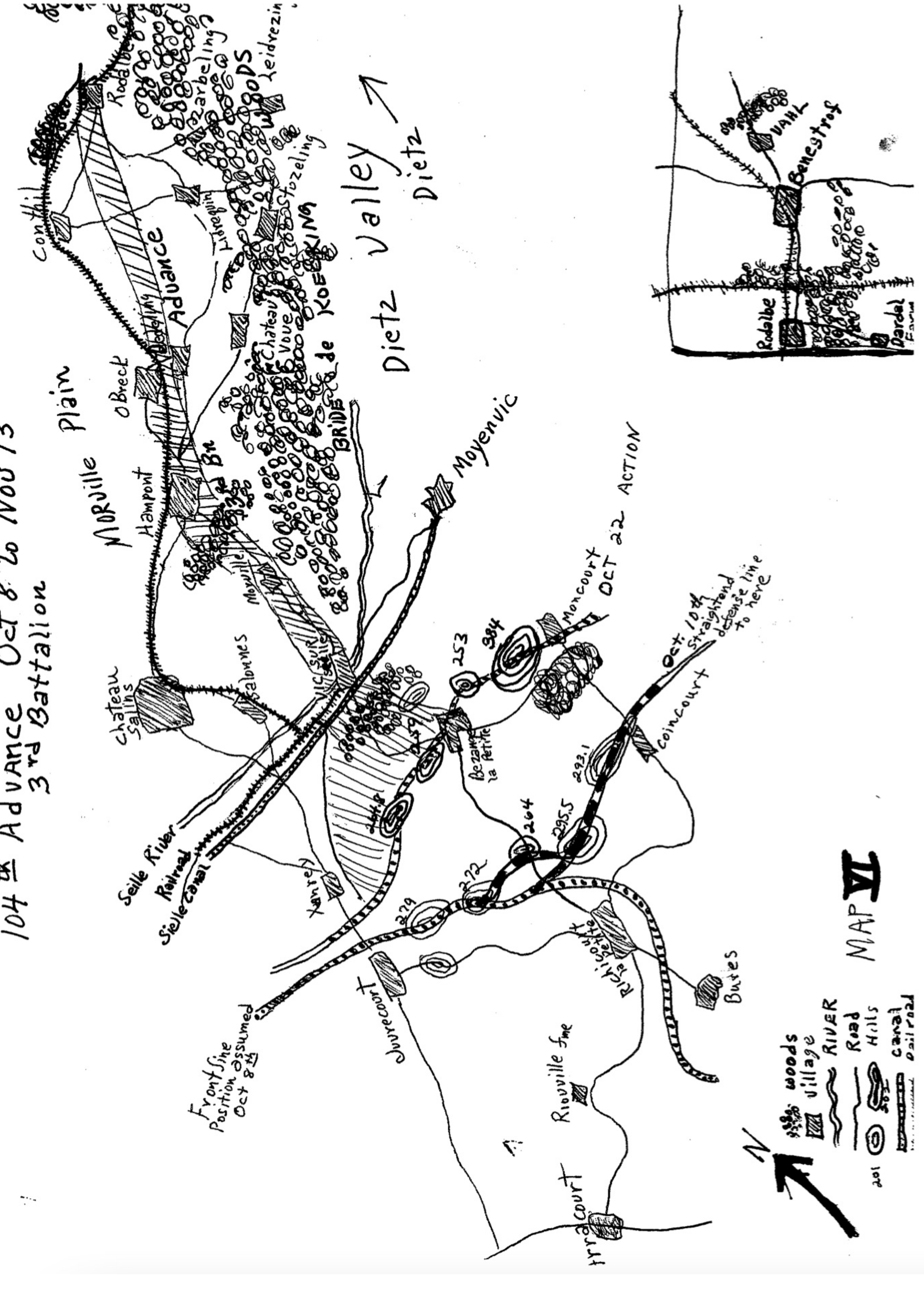
Map IB
Seille River
Seille canal
Moyenvic
Nov 8
Chateau Salins
2nd Bn
Xanrey
Juvrecourt
oct 8 Sector assumed
(started oct 10) Sector relieved
Riouville fme
Arracourt
Bures
Coincourt
Moncourt
Moncourt Woods
Hampont
Obreck
Chateau Voue
Sotzeling
Conthil
Zarbeling
Leidrezing
Rodalbe
Montdidier
Vahl
Nebing
Albestroff
Torcheville
Benestroff
Roads
Rivers


MAP II
MONCOURT
3 Rd Battalion as
Line of departure
COINCOURT
384
253
293.1
BEZANGE
la PETITE
259
264.8
264
272
295.5
RICHECOURT
la PETITE
N
Oct 22
MONCOURT WOODS
ROADS
HILL
1st Phase
2nd Phase
Drawn by Les Edsall


N
ROADS
RIVER
RAIL ROAD
CANAL
WOODS
NOV 8th
OPENING ATTACK
drawn by Les Edsall
Chateau SALINS
HAMPONT
MORVILLE
BRIDGE de KOECKING
WOODS
SALONNES
VIC SUR SEILLE
SEILLE RIVER
SEILLE CANAL
MOYEN
2nd BN
3rd Bn
1st Bn
+ L co.


NOV 12th
RAILROADS
ROADS
WOODS
N
11th PANZER counter attack
RODALBE
1 CO.
CONTHIL
DEDELING
1ST BN
3RD BN
2ND BN
WOODS
ZARBELING
DARDAL FARM
KOECKING
LIDREQUIN
CHATEAU VOUE
SOTZBLING
BRIDE
de
LEIDREZING
MAP IV
SEILLE VALLEY
drawn by des Edsall


LARGE OPEN AREA
WOODED RIDGE
OPEN RIDGE
BURNING HAYSTACK
L. CO.
K Co
BURNING Barn + HOUSE
Burning HOUSE + BARN
Route of 11th PANZER
NOV. 12th
6 Sherman TANKS Withdraw about 4 P.M.
N
Friendly Woods
to contin
MAP I
Les Edsall



104th Advance Oct 8 to Nov 13
3rd Battalion
MAP VI
woods
village
RIVER
Road
Hills
canal
Railroad
Seille River
Railroad
Seille Canal
Chateau Salins
Salonnes
Xanrey
Morville
Hampont
Obreck
Morville plain
Advance
Dietz Valley
Dietz
Chateau Voue
WOODS
Conthil
Rodalbe
Moyenvic
Moncourt
OCT 22 ACTION
Oct. 10th straightened defense line to here
Coincourt
Bezange la Petite
Front line position assumed Oct 8th
Juvrecourt
Riouville Fme
Bures
253
384
293.1
295.5
264
272
279
VAHL
Benestrof
Rodalbe

SOURCES

I WAS NO HERO BUT: I WAS NO HERO, an autobiography by Lester K. Edsall

ROADS TO LIBERATION FROM OFLAG 64 by Clarence R. Meltesen.

WORLD WAR II ENGAGEMENT MAPS, hand-drawn by Lester Edsall, are located on separate pages following the last page of the biography.

A HISTORY OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN 100 MAPS by Jeremy Black, *SMITHSONIAN WORLD WAR II MAP BY MAP*

WIKIPEDIA

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers