

INFANTRY LETTERS



HERE'S TO THOMAS ATKINS

As part of my duties in the Educational and Training Branch, Headquarters 2 Division, at Imphal Barracks in England, I have the privilege of reviewing *INFANTRY* magazine for our *MSLS Review*, which is edited at The Prince Consort's Library in Aldershot.

I was intrigued reading about the incredible bravery exhibited by Private First Class Thomas E. Atkins in the Pacific at the end of World War II, for which he was awarded the Medal of Honor. (See "Fifty Years Ago in World War II, *INFANTRY*," March-April 1995, Page 21.)

I am sure it has not escaped your attention that "Thomas Atkins" was the name chosen by the British War Office before World War I to represent all soldiers of the British Army. It became the nickname, in polite society, for the British soldier. Even the Germans used it.

One of Rudyard Kipling's more famous poems, "Tommy," contains the moving refrains:

O it's "Tommy this and Tommy that, an' Tommy go away."

But it's "Thank you Mr. Atkins" when the band begins to play.

And later:

For it's "Tommy this and Tommy that" an' "Chuck 'im out the brute"

But it's "Saviour of his country" when the guns begin to shoot.

If I have one regret, it is that when I retire soon after nearly 50 years with the Army, I shall no longer be in a position to review the next issue of *INFANTRY*.

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REMEMBERING THE WORLD WAR II RIFLE COMPANY

At the request of several former members of Company I, 397th Infantry Regiment, 100th Division, I have begun trying to put together an intimate history of that company's service in World War II.

We have located about 40 surviving members—many of whom began their military service with basic training at Fort Benning as members of the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). That program was abruptly canceled in February 1944 because of manpower needs, and the trainees were shipped to the 100th Division, which at that time was stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Almost all of these people had just turned 18 years old at the time. They expected to be sent to college after infantry basic but instead found themselves a part of General Alexander Patch's Seventh Army trying to cross the Vosges Mountains of Alsace in that bitter fall of 1944.

Many of those remaining have vivid memories of that (almost forgotten) campaign, but some have no memories, and others remember things that never happened. (We are, after all, old men. And rapidly getting older.)

Among the things on which we fail to agree is the exact size of a World War II infantry company. My memory says 186 men at full strength. Others say 184. Military historian John Keegan says 193.

My question is: Can you or one of your readers provide an authoritative count? What was the Table of Organization—how many cooks, clerks, Browning automatic rifle (BAR)-men?

Another question: We have found copies of the daily "morning reports" for the company, but they are signed by an officer we never heard of and contain such unvarying notations as "terrain rough, weather cold, morale excellent." Who wrote this fantasy? Certainly not our captain (now dead). You don't climb out of a muddy foxhole every morning and scribble out something that says "morale excellent."

Any help you can give would be appreciated.

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: Being more of a Vietnam-vintage soldier myself, I turned for help to the libraries in the Infantry School and the National Infantry Museum and then to former *INFANTRY* Editor Albert Garland, who served in World War II.*

As a result, we were able to send Mr. Bowman a copy of the Infantry Rifle Company Table of Organization (T/O 7-17), dated March 1, 1943, along with the company organization from an Infantry School training bulletin based on War Department Tables of Organization and Equipment Nos. 7-11 to 7-19, inclusive, all dated 15 July 1943.

In addition, Mr. Garland wrote a detailed answer to Mr. Bowman's questions. Other World War II veterans, as well as today's rifle company commanders, may also find his comments interesting.

I commanded a rifle company (Company L, 3d Battalion, 334th Infantry

Regiment, 84th Infantry Division) in northwest Europe from mid-November 1944 to late March 1945. Please keep in mind that my response is based on what I remember (I am not exactly a young man, either) and how I ran my company. Other company commanders may have had different experiences, but I believe we did pretty much the same thing, with some exceptions resulting from division policies.

The 1943 Infantry Rifle Company Table of Organization, with one exception—the 17 basic riflemen shown in the company headquarters—looks like the company I commanded, although we were seldom ever at full strength. I simply do not recall such a group of soldiers in my headquarters, although I think I had more people in my communications section than shown. In addition to the communications sergeant, I had two radio operators and a group of wiremen. I suppose some (or most) of those 17 “basic riflemen” ended up in the communications section.

You will also notice that the company had three rocket launchers (“Bazookas”) but no gunners or assistant gunners for them. I normally attached one of the rocket launchers, which were in the weapons platoon, to each of my rifle platoons. Thus, I had to find two men to handle each of the launchers, because a gunner could not load the piece by himself and then fire it. (I suppose he could in an emergency, but it was not recommended. Besides, his assistant also carried extra rounds.) These two-man teams may have come out of those 17 basics mentioned earlier.

I also remember that, when we landed in England and before we went over to the continent, higher headquarters recommended that each rifle squad be equipped with three BARs instead of the one authorized by the T/O. This was intended to counter the firepower advantage the German infantry seemed to have over us, in light of their machine pistols and numerous machineguns.

But I don’t ever remember converting to this idea and don’t know where I would have found the manpower after our first week in combat. We had enough trouble keeping one BAR per squad operational.

Although our two jeeps and trailers belonged to the weapons platoon, I often used them for company business—bringing forward hot food, for example, and the mail. Frequently, I used one of the jeeps to travel to and from the company command post to battalion or regiment, and occasionally to division. For example, at the end of each month (or thereabouts), I had to go to the division finance office to pick up the company payroll and then return what money I had left to that same office. The company clerk, who was with the division adjutant general section at the division rear headquarters, would frequently use one of the jeeps; he kept up with the incoming and outgoing mail.

In brief, a standard 1943 rifle company consisted of six officers and 187 enlisted men, a total of 193. But remember that we always had three medical aid men attached to us from the battalion medical section, one for each rifle platoon. At full strength, then, with these attached medical personnel, a rifle company fielded 196 men. (For an excellent reference work on the World War II Army organization, see *U.S. Army Handbook, 1939-1945*, by George Forty, published by Charles Scribner’s Sons in 1980.)

My company mess detachment also had a 2 1/2-ton truck with a 1 1/2-ton trailer. These belonged to the regimental service company, and one driver was furnished for the truck. Many times, the mess sergeant kept his stoves mounted on the truck so he could move on short notice. Normally, he stayed in the service company area, and we sent our jeeps back to pick up the food when we could, which was more often than most people think. If the company expected to stay in one area for any length of time, he would come forward, take the

field ranges off the truck, and prepare the meals in the company area, usually in a building of some kind. The trailer, of course, was used for carrying fuel for the stoves and for carrying the rations and whatever other foodstuffs he could scrounge.

It was the company clerk in the division rear headquarters who also kept the morning report. On his trips forward, he and I would get together to talk about our casualties and who had been killed or wounded. I based my comments on reports I received from each of the platoon leaders and from the aid men. Since the clerk had access to medical reports from the battalion and regimental aid stations, he often had more accurate information about casualties than I had. When we were not certain of a soldier’s status, we would report him “missing in action” and carry him as such until we could get more accurate information.

When we knew for certain a soldier had been killed, the clerk would bring me the man’s personal mail and packages, if any. I had to note on the envelope of each letter—on the back flap, I believe—the words “Deceased, Return to Sender.” I made it a point to write to the man’s family as soon as I could, expressing my regret and explaining as much as I could about the action in which their soldier had received a fatal wound. We kept the packages; they usually contained food, and we had all agreed that our packages would be shared with the members of the company in the event something happened to us.

On the weapons platoon: Normally, I would attach the machineguns to the platoons and keep the mortars under my control, with the weapons platoon leader actually directing their fire.

I hope these thoughts will answer some of your questions and help you in writing your company history.

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