

On our way again, this time we fanned out, stalking up a gradual rise covered with brush, vegetation and small trees. Nearing the crown I made a dash over the top and dove for cover behind a fair sized tree. I didn't see any obvious movements or hear any sounds from the direction of the enemy. Peering intently I noticed a man sitting with his back against a tree. Did I have the drop on an enemy? Did I want the drop on the enemy? Without being threatened how could I justify a meek stranger as an enemy? Should I shoot a helpless sitting man, a human being in cold blood? I had trouble with this emotional feeling for a long time. What kind of a soldier was I going to be? Reacting in self defense may be acceptable, but for me to strike the first blow is contrary to my nature. I chickened and just watched him. He never moved.

Was he sleeping? Should I be brave and take my first prisoner. Cautiously I stood up with the rifle at the ready and moved gingerly toward the enemy. There was no movement or sign of recognition on his part and I noticed his eyes were open. Something was amiss. I gently nudged him with the gun barrel horrified to find he was a corpse. He was older than I and had darker skin. I thought he may have been a Turk or a Moslem. We came from different parts of the world meeting here as strangers and by our respective government's decree we're enemies.

I learned later that the enemy had a policy of forcing conquered able bodied men into their army. The enemy even had a name for this malarkey, kanonenfutter, translated that means, cannon fodder. The corpse I stumbled across was one of those fodders.

This war stuff was scary. I remember one occasion when things went from bad to worse. I was hungry, dirty, tired, miserable, emotionally low. While in this mood I was trapped, pinned down by a barrage of small arms fire. My mind exploded! "How rough can it get?"

I didn't speak out loud so didn't expect an answer, I was just venting my frustration. Having some Christian teachings the thought occurred, was this mental concept addressed to my God? And if so, am I asking Him to reveal how bad things can get? Surely I didn't want the answer to that question. Quickly I mentally responded, "Forget the question! I never want to know how bad things can get."

This one sided dialogue proved to be a revelation. I perceived that no matter what might befall and betide, things could possibly be worse. This perception would not change the situation, but it might make the mental burden lighter, relieve the stress and anxiety and make life a little more tolerable. This perspective made me realize that all was not lost or hopeless and gave me courage and strength to continue, not succumb to despair. This experience taught me to accept the pitfalls of life. I learned that any given incident if not life threatening was just a temporary inconvenience. I learned to appreciate the value of simple necessities like breathing, eating and keeping the body warm.

There is an old expression, "the nakedness of the battlefield." It is descriptive and full of meaning for anyone who has seen a battle, the feeling that prevades the forward areas is loneliness. There is little to be seen; friend and foe, as well as the engines of war, seem to disappear from sight when troops are deployed for a fight. Each man feels himself so much alone, and each is prey to the human fear and terror that to move or show himself may result in instant death.

General Dwight Eisenhower ¹³

I know the feeling. The reality of combat, the actual shooting, made me lonely and afraid. I felt inadequate for the job. There were too many unforeseen factors and circumstances beyond my control. I needed some encouragement, some assurance to bear this burden called war. And there was no one to turn to for help. Thinking of my religious upbringing I asked God, "This is too big for me to handle by myself. I need all the help I can get. Give me courage and strength. Please help me." And I believe He did. I have never forgotten that incident or the prayer.

This next encounter is a very personal one. Upon awaking one morning the forward outposts could not be reached by telephone. Unbeknownst to us in the rear echelon, was that the outposts saw the enemy enmasse scaling the hillside, and in particular nearing the crest of the byway, cutting off their path of retreat. Seeing they were out numbered and fearing they were no match they scaled around the northerly slope and at this moment were on their way back to the rear echelon. This route was hazardous and not used, there was never any need to do so. That was the situation as I headed down the byway, alone as I always did. The men from the outposts were headed for safety whereas I was headed the other way.

As I meandered along I kept one eye on the phone line and the other where I was going. Unexpectedly just below the crest I saw three helmets jotting through the underbrush. We must have surprised each other, as neither of us were in a ready firing position. They responded faster than I did, I hit the ground as their rifle fire zinged over head. I grabbed a grenade, pulled the pin and held it momentarily, very momentarily. The enemy being so close I didn't want to give them time to throw the grenade back at me.

I lobbed the grenade and as soon as it exploded I jumped up, fired the carbine rapidly in the general direction, turned around and ran like all get out. Seems fear is a great motivator for bursts of speed.

I ran right into a patrol that was sent out to check on my welfare. Boy did I greet them with enthusiasm. When I told the Lieutenant what had happened I must have been in a state of shock as I babbled on and on about my narrow escape, expressing a very selfish concern for my welfare. In time I calmed down realizing once again I was spared.

Once again I was fortunate and grateful, it was time for thanksgiving not venting anger. In this encounter the cards were stacked against me. I was dealt a poor hand, and yet once again I was spared. I believe some one up above was smiling on me. No doubt about it, this war was confirming my faith. In time a soldier learns to be ever alert and aware of the unheralded happenstance. Survival although dependent on one's actions is not always the deciding factor. One's life is held in balance by a little piece of metal, smaller than a man's finger, about 5/16" in diameter and about 3/4" long, being propelled about 1700 MPH. This hurling piece of deadly steel, piercing flesh, rending a vital organ combined with the wrong time and wrong place is the difference between life and death. Add human carelessness to that combination and one's chance for survival becomes rather slim and as the saying goes, that's all she wrote, there ain't no more. And the government sends a telegram to somebody's mother, We regret...

After this incident I was given a three day pass to the French resort city of Nice, and later awarded the Bronze Star medal for meritorious achievement during a military operation against an enemy. The newspaper account reads as follows:

He (I) kept telephone line between two American units in constant repair, although under constant enemy fire and menaced by German patrols. Once trapped by three Germans he killed two with a grenade and the third with his carbine.

I accept with honor the recognition for a job well done. But the news account almost implies the decoration was given for destroying the enemy. I abhor such a thought, unfortunately this was a by product of self preservation. At the time, under the circumstances it was an instinctive reaction for survival.

Ardennes

The German attack began on 16 December 1944, with an artillery barrage from 2,000 guns along an 80 mile front. They drove a wedge or salient as the Generals call it, through parts of Belgium and Luxembourg almost to the Meuse river, a distance of about 50 miles. The battle ultimately involved a million men. By the middle of January the opposing armies were almost back to where they were before the battle started. Historians tell us this battle was one of the worst of the entire war. Losses in guns, tanks, trucks and equipment was enormous on both sides. Total fatalities, about 190,000 plus the entire destruction or loss of guns, tanks, trucks and all the other armaments of war.¹⁵ I was in it, darn near froze and the army awarded the Ardennes Battle Ribbon to all the survivors, which included me.

The Battle of the Bulge reminds me of beautiful pine forests, open rolling fields, fresh fallen snow, quaint little villages, frost bite, trench foot, lots of casualties and being wet, cold, hungry, tired and exhausted.

Returning to France I was whisked to Liege, Belgium. It was a temporary stop before rejoining the unit that was somewhere on the north or right flank of the enemy's salient. Liege was in the flight path of the new unmanned flying bomb, the V I. The bomb was like a little airplane with wings and flew in a relatively flat trajectory. The engines drone warned of it's arrival which could be heard before the bomb came into view. The V I stirred fear but was hindered by announcing it's arrival. The buzz bomb as we called it was an infant in the new generation of jet propulsion.¹⁶

Some time during this hectic period December 25th rolled around and each of us received a hot meal, a complete meal in a separate container, some what like when the pizza man knocks on the door, the hot meal just showed up. On this Christmas day in 1944 I was mighty grateful and thankful for, "just being around," and not losing the, "Gift of life." Solemnly I said, "Happy Birthday."

Some time before Christmas the 517th entered the battle without me and engaged the enemy at several places in Belgium. The primary mission was to contain the enemy and establish a stable line of resistance. After gaining ground in one direction it was not unusual to be counter attacked from either flank. The forward attack was diverted 90 degrees and continued in full fury. Confusion ruled. Positions changed as rapidly as the clock ticked. Orders when recieved were late and at times disregarded as conditions had changed and the orders were per-

ceived to be suicidal. The initial mission was the over riding goal, establish a stable line of defense. Where, could only be established by battle field conditions.

Little villages attained infamy by soldiers bloodshed. Villages with names like Soy, Hotton, Haid-Hits, Marcouray, Sur-Les-Hys, Manhay, Dochamps, Samree, Freyneux, Lamormenil, Fraiture, Stavelot, St. Vith, and then there was the hideous massacre of about 80 American prisoners near Malmedy.¹⁷

After about a week of combat duty the unit was pulled back to lick their wounds and regroup. They were deployed in the pine forests along the road leading from Liege to Manhay. About this time I rejoined the group. Envision a thick forest of pine trees, the branches sagging under the weight of the snow, and lots of fresh fallen snow. Seems snow has the ability to soak up sounds, lending an eerie quality to the still air.

Fighting the enemy has always been the object of war I guess. But the weather elements, the cold and snow was an additional enemy that took it's toll. Supplies were brought to us and we were free to pick and choose. White mattress covers were available which were to be used as camouflage. One had a choice, a perceived concealment, or a strait-jacket. I felt survival depended more on freedom of mobility rather than blending with the elements. And was the same reason I shunned the heavy overcoat. One was too restricted and slowed by the weight of the coat or the cumbersome cover. So I continued to wear the green field jacket, with two shirts, a pair of trousers, two pair long johns, a knit cap under the helmet, two pair socks and then when I tried to find galoshes was dismayed to learn there weren't any large enough to slip over the trooper boots. I managed to get a small sized pair of rubber buckle galoshes that would keep the feet dry for protection against trench foot. At times there are no easy choices, so with moist eyes I shucked the paratrooper boots and pulled on the galoshes. I could understand how a cowboy feels when he is forced to shoot his fallen horse. And of course gloves, this was my uniform of the day, wardrobe for the night and protection against the winter weather elements.

Fresh snow covered pine forests and meadows unblemished by man or beast may be a picturesque scene to look at, but not to live in, especially when there is no escape and you are compelled to live in the stuff day and night suffering from the effects like: cold wet feet from wet boots, no dry place to sit, squat, kneel or prop the firearm. Simple walking becomes a concentrated effort, each step planned, not spontaneous, feeling for firm footing as one goes along. Plodding over relatively flat terrain is the easy part, then come the gulleys, slippery slopes and ravines sinking up to the keister. Snow hides unforeseen depressions, stumps and fallen branches. When sliding down a slope or tumbling ankle over tea kettle the outburst is the same as any other

miscue, as in golf or bowling...."Oh S..t." Any appreciation of the beauty of snow is just a memory of one's youth.

The unit returned to the shooting war by plodding through knee deep snow toward Trois Ponts. What we weren't carrying we didn't have. The weather cleared which usually brings lower temperatures and this was no exception. It was dark when we finally stopped and dispersed among the pine trees with expectations of getting some rest. We were cold, wet, hungry and exhausted. Pangs of hunger were long gone. I was tired and exhausted, just wanted to collapse and sleep. I hacked off some pine boughs and stacked them into a pile to lie on, to serve as insulation from the snow and cold.

I laid on the pine boughs, removed the galoshes so my feet could get some air and perhaps evaporate the moisture from the socks, covered the best I could with some more boughs. Being active all day the clothing absorbed some perspiration and the damp long johns became an ice pack. I was shivering and fatigued, craving sleep, visualizing being warm. Shivering tensed the muscles, how could I relax? I was exhausted yet sleep wouldn't come. In time the cold was not as severe, some comfort in that, and I began to drowse. I didn't feel any warmer, just didn't feel as cold. Strange I didn't feel as cold and yet not warm either. Was my mind playing tricks on me? Maybe I couldn't sense the cold? If I couldn't sense the difference between cold and warm what did I sense? The perception startled me with a jolt! WAS I GETTING NUMB? TINGES OF FROST BITE!

Perceiving the danger of falling asleep I now had to stay awake. A while ago I craved sleep and now ironically was compelled to stave it off. I walked around, paced, moved the arms and legs exercise fashion to encourage circulation, generate body heat and stay awake. I kept moving throughout the long cold night. The hint of dawn assured my survival and would see another day. I was still cold but so grateful to feel anything at all. I was very much obliged to you know who. What did I learn from this? I learned that one can only get so cold, after that numbness sets in. When this happens one can say with all honesty it doesn't get any colder then that. I learned the sensation of cold is dependent on other factors, like wind, humidity, wet or dry cloths, not temperature alone. I learned some new words like, wind chill, exposure, hypothermia, frost bite and trench foot. I learned that I don't need a thermometer on the wall indicating I'm comfortable or should be.

Leaving the cover of the woods the next day, the unit advanced through Trois Ponts with little difficulty. There was no cover beyond the village, nothing but a vast open snow covered field slowly rising upward to another isolated pine forest. F company was to advance along the west bank of the Salm river which was overgrown with shrubs and trees providing some concealment and protect the units left flank. Another worry spot was a commanding hill across the river to the left front of the advance. Two companies moved out across the open field without

drawing enemy fire until they were fully exposed, then the enemy let go with every available artillery piece. The companies were caught in a cross fire coming from the two forward wooded hills. They were trapped as the slightest movement drew volleys of enemy fire. F company with some cover fared better. I was still cold and hungry but thankful I was around, I had no complaints. We withdrew under the cover of darkness, stumbling through the white manure. Each of us muttering choice words of encouragement to get the hell out of here. After dark, over 100 dead, dying or wounded young American boys were removed from that field.¹⁰

After a few hours rest, we were ordered once again, to take the high ground! After learning the hard way, the unit circled to the left, way around and waited for the cover of darkness. Then we went like circus elephants, hanging on to the guy in front because it was so dark and we infiltrated almost all the way to yesterdays objective. When day light came the enemy was surprised, we weren't, they lost, we won, a day late and 100 men short.

Time, ammunition and lives were expended moving from one wood lot to the next wood lot or village. Closing in on St. Vith, heavy resistance was encountered in several villages along the way. This time tanks joined us as we waited in one of those piney woods. An open snow covered field that sloped downward to the troublesome village lay before us. The snarling of the engines inspired us with grandiose feelings of power and strength. Suddenly every tank commenced firing toward the village, then as the tanks lurched forward we lurched, stumbled, fell and plodded in, around and among all that heavy armor moving as one mighty fighting machine all the while the tanks cannons spewing fire, smoke and whistling steel. The shells that were made somewhere back in the States were now on their final delivery to the enemy. It was one of those moments when war looked exciting and this attack would have made a good movie scene, but the movies are make believe and nobody dies. After play acting, the actors as well as all other working Americans back in the States, are able to go to their homes with all comforts and conveniences, or go out to eat, maybe have a drink or two, then go to a warm dry bed, alone or with some one. These were the things we thought about and missed and for some of us would never be, the war wasn't over yet.

On another encounter, we were huddled in a wooded area preparing to move across an open snow covered field. It was a long distance with no cover of any kind. On the far side were trees, shrubs and the enemy. It was a situation when once committed, come what may, it would be foolhardy to stop.

Off we went, me with a radio on my back, the antenna waving, signaling for attention. There is no fast way to slog through snow. Being clearly visible we drew small arms fire immediately. At this time I heard the same sound that I heard during basic training while crawling

on my belly through the obstacle course. The live rounds being fired overhead that close to one's ears sound like fire crackers popping. The only consolation, if any, is that it was individual rifle fire and not an automatic weapon. I kept moving like a rabbit, wandering, weaving, all the while thinking some one has my silhouette in his gun sight. Did a round have my name on it? One gets these thoughts. More slogging, more "pops." Halfway into the field more or less and the rifle fire ceased. Another close encounter. But just another day in the life of a front line soldier. I am tempted to ask again, why? Why not? How come? By now I have learned first hand there is no answer. Another 1,000 yards closer to the end of the trail. I hope so, my feet are hurting, but then so thankful to be able to feel the hurt and ever so grateful to have survived another day.

About this time, the end of January, after a month of fierce fighting the enemy was driven back whence he came from and the Battle of the Bulge was over at a staggering cost of lives on both sides. And again I survived and earned another battle star. I believe there was much more power protecting me than my guardian angel could muster. And I said, "Thanks for favors received."

The unit was pulled back and relieved from combat duty and spent about a week cleaning up, showering, shaving, getting clean clothing and for the first time in a month had hot meals. By now the cold was letting up, the snow became soft under foot and we were about to engage the enemy on his own soil. Little did we realize he was determined to fight fanatically, willing to die for the Fuhrer. The worst wasn't over, there was more war to be fought in Germany. But thats another country and another story.

26 December 1943, Fort Benning, Georgia. From Howard.

I wanted to write sooner so I could wish you a Merry Christmas, but I just couldn't find the time. I hope you had a good Christmas. Did you see Mother? I imagine you did, she said she would try and go up for Christmas. I think I know how she feels. When a soldier is in a parade with the band playing he

is proud to be in the Army of the United States, but in his heart he'd rather be back home. I imagine Mother feels much the same way. She's proud she has three sons in the service, but in her heart she'd rather have them back home.

Today we moved back into the United States. Before this we were in Alabama. That part of camp was just isolated. I have it pretty nice here. I sleep right by a window. These barracks are the modern kind. Across the street are the WAC (Womens Auxilary Corps) barracks. There must be something going on day and night.

I've completed the first week of training. It was calisthenics, seven hours a day of muscle bending. My arms and legs were plenty tired. We would go on runs. Run for five minutes, walk for two, on and on for hours on end. That's really tiresome. The next two weeks will be spent packing chutes, and jumping off the towers. They say that the airplane vibrates, rattles and makes so much noise your glad to jump out. You'd rather take a chance on jumping out than landing in the plane. I'm not worried, I volunteered and I'm going to stick it out. Write soon and tell me what kind of Christmas you had. Wishing you a Happy New Year.

28 September 1944, Somewhere in France. From Howard.

As you know by now I am somewhere in Southern France. I jumped into this country on August 15th, that's a day I'll probably never forget. I haven't had a rest since then except for the last couple of days. I was able to visit the city of Nice. It's a pretty nice city compared to Rome. France is a better country than Italy. These people were glad to see us.

I haven't heard from you lately. What have you been doing? Mother finally got a letter from Artie. I suppose you know that he's somewhere in Northern France. No, I'm not part of General Eisenhower's Airborne Army. I'm glad I'm not. I'm in the Airborne Task Force. I've made a total of eight jumps, I'm satisfied, I don't care to jump anymore.

Time has gone awfully fast, here it is the end of September, by the time you get this it will be October. I told Mother not to send me anything for Christmas. That song is becoming popular again, "I'll Be Home For Christmas." I hope it comes true, all of us over here hope it comes true. I'm in good health. I can thank my lucky stars for that.

5 October 1944, Somewhere in Southern France. From Howard.

Yesterday I received a letter from Artie. The first one in a long time. I answered it right away. He said he was proud of his little brother, meaning me. He right flattered me. All the foreigners I've met all want American cigarettes. Even the little kids smoke.

Mother asked me what I wanted for Christmas. A fur lined parka, something to protect me against the cold. I don't expect you to send me anything. If you do send me something, send a couple of magazines, airplane, or hobby books. I thought when I got older I'd lose interest, but somehow I like to work with my hands.

The questions you asked are mostly military information. I'll do my best to answer. I'm in the 7th Army, Airborne Task Force. I don't know what the insignia is. My job is communications. I lay wire and put in telephones. The artillery shells break the wire, so it keeps me running to keep the lines in working order. My Superiors knew I had a big job, so they are trying to award me the Bronze Star. It's just a medal for extra duty. I'm in good health, but just had another tooth pulled. Good bye now. I'll write when I can.

31 January 1945, Somewhere in Belgium. From Howard.

I received your V-mail letter and package, and also the magazines. Thanks a lot. Betty sent me a heavy pair of wool socks, just what I need, but she sent size thirteen. I'll wear them though.

I'm enjoying a little rest but not in a rest camp. The other day I had a shower and got clean clothes. The first time I had my clothes off for a couple of weeks. I'm up in Belgium now. I'm really getting around, seeing the world. Belgium seems to be pretty good dairy country. I've been able to get milk occasionally. I'm in good health yet and feeling fine.

It's melting out today. I hope it gets warm pretty soon. This winter fighting is terrible. It's all right when a person keeps moving. At night if we get our bed rolls it's warm. If we don't get them we freeze. The bad part is we have to stay out 24 hours a day. When we get cold and wet

we generally stay that way. So far I haven't had any ill effects. That's about all the news I have. How was your Christmas? How is everybody? I hope I hear from you soon.

5 May 1945, Somewhere in France. From Howard.

I'm in a different hospital now. I've been here two weeks today. As yet nothing has been given to me. That is in the line of pills. Plenty of examinations and x-rays. I'm feeling fine, but if I'd leave the dysentery would come right back.

I've been very happy and contented the past week. On the correspondence course, I have completed three lessons already and am working on the fourth. I get up about 6:30, eat, wash and make my bed, then at 8:00 I go over to the drawing room. Draw until 11:45, eat, read our paper and start drawing over again at 1:00. Quit about five, eat supper and by that time it's 5:30 or 6:00. So I've only got about three hours of leisure. Some nights I go to shows, other nights write letters or play chess or read.

Events have really moved fast in the last two weeks. President Roosevelt's death, Ernie Pyle died, the German Army in Italy surrendered. Now the Germans in the north have surrendered. We hold most of Germany right now. It's all over but the mopping up in my opinion. When the fighting ends here we'll all go to the South Pacific. So the war won't be over until Japan is finished. I got a hunch that's going to be quite a nut to crack.

One little thing, I'm the best chess player in my ward. I've only lost three games. In the other hospital I was the undefeated champ. The weather here has been very lousy, cold and rain. Also snow flurries. How is everybody? Tommy, Grandma and Ralph. I hope I hear from you soon.

14 August 1945, Conflans, France. From Howard.

Everybody is waiting for the news from Japan. This morning over our radio the American station said that the Japanese had reached a decision and that it was on the way to the Officials. Then over the Guam radio station they said that Japan had accepted the terms. So would that mean that the war is over? By the time this letter gets to you it will probably be over.

Yesterday I received a box from mother. It had my bathing trunks in it. Now I think the summer weather is over, over here. It has been chilly and rainy for almost a week now. Artie wrote a letter to me, he is a private again. He said he was riding in a jeep and the Colonel saw him so now he is a private again. I am only a Private First Class. I kept turning ratings down. I worked with communications, and the CO wanted to make me a sergeant. I asked him what I had to do and he said I had to carry the radio. So I always told him no I didn't want to be a sergeant if I had to carry the radio. I carried the radio several times when we were short of men, but as soon as we got replacements I stopped carrying it. Several times in the bulge, in Belgium I carried the darn thing with that aerial swinging in the air. When shots ring near you, you know somebody is shooting at you. But when the shots keep coming you know he is out to get you. No thanks, I didn't want to be a sergeant, that waving antenna attracts too much attention.

Jerome has volunteered for the Pacific. But now he might not have to go. I hope he don't go. Just what will happen to me I don't know. Now that the war is just about over more men will be sent home. I got my application to go to school. I hope it is okayed. I'd rather stay over and go to school then go home, be a civilian and get a job. I need brushing up on my education and if I can do it over here on army time, then that's what I want.

I couldn't get any perfume at the PX yesterday. As soon as I get a chance I'll see if I can find some in town. Saturday I turned down a furlough to England. I didn't care to go, I'd rather go and see Artie and Jerome, but I couldn't do that so I told them to give it to somebody else.

The only patch I have is a double A, like this, AA, which is the 82nd Airborne. Well it just came over the radio. The Japs have accepted the terms. Boy are we happy. Well so long for now.