

Mightier Than The Sword?

In the aftermath of the brutal fighting around the Tête des Reclos above Raon l'Etape in mid-November 1944, members of Company A, 399th Infantry found themselves in an area hurriedly evacuated by the Germans. To their surprise, they found some interesting reading material along a Vosges trail.

Doc Emmons found several copies of an Army newspaper somewhere and distributed them to anyone whose hands were not too cold to turn the pages. The newspaper was called *The Lightning News*. We were familiar with the Army daily *Stars and Stripes*, but deliveries were slow and we had seen only one issue since entering combat. This *Lightning News* appeared to be some sort of Seventh Army or VI Corps paper, although there was no specific identification of its source.

The newspaper wrote rather accurately about our lousy weather.

The winter lasts five months in the Vosges, from November 1st to April 1st. The European winter proves every day more severe than we expected it to be. The sufferings our men are put to are beyond imagination. It often happens that they can't change their wet clothes for several days. Then again they can't get any rest due to the fierce fighting of the Germans, and on top of all this the cold against which they are not sufficiently protected gives them plenty of trouble. These conditions have considerably slowed down our advance and have made us suffer severe reverses. Do people at home realize how cruel and pitiless war is, and what it means to fight not only against the stubborn resistance of the Germans but also against the nastiness of a climate which we were not prepared for?

In the same vein, *Lightning News* quoted *Stars and Stripes* as follows:

These Joes have a job. It's a life or death job and they're doing it 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every week of the month.

The newspaper warned of the housing accommodations in the Vosges, where simple farmhouses were limited to a wood-burning stove in one room as the sole source of heating. There were articles about the Allies' failed attempt to put an airborne force across the Rhine at Arnhem in September and the U.S. Fifth Army's slow progress in the winter fighting in northern Italy.

Another article described the case of an infantry private who decided to walk out on the Army because he felt he wasn't getting a square deal. The private took advantage of a "Safe Conduct Pass" (of which *Lightning News* reprinted the text) stating that he would be accorded safe passage through the German lines and would be luxuriously installed and generously fed in a Prisoner of War facility operated in full accordance with the Geneva Conventions on the Rules of Land Warfare.

Although I had had occasional daydreams about how nice it would be to find myself in a German POW cage with three meals a day and no more danger of death or maiming, I was nevertheless

startled to see an Army newspaper practically advocating that we follow this course if we felt we weren't getting a square deal.

"Hey Scotty," I said to Kyle. "Did you read about this Safe Conduct Pass?"

"I'm just coming to it," Scotty Kyle replied. His face took on an incredulous smile as he read the text of the Safe Conduct Pass.

The stories I had been reading in the newspaper (Such as Arnhem and Italy) seemed factual enough, but why was all the news so essentially negative, even if technically accurate? And how had supplies of the paper found their way to this remote road junction in the middle of what until two days ago had been the Germans' impregnable Winter Line?

"Hey Doc," I said to Doc Emmons. "Where did you find this newspaper?"

"Oh I got it from a ditch right there beside the main road," Doc Emmons replied. "There musta been 500 copies."

By now everyone in the squad was buried in *Lightning News*. Many got no further than page one where a nude woman raised a glass to some wealthy civilian back home and said "Cheerio! This hits the spot!"

Everyone smiled or chuckled at something they were reading. Pop Swartz said, "Let's get inside one of those 'simple farmhouses with a wood-burning stove' right quick like and heat up a nice stew of C and K rations."

Scotty Kyle roared with laughter as he finished reading the Safe Conduct Pass. He then read it aloud to the entire group.

"Do you know who wrote this damn rag?" Scotty Kyle snorted. "It was old 'GI Joe' Goebbels himself !"

The Germans had evidently expected to spend the five-month long Vosges winter right here along the Neufmaisons - Raon l'Etape highway in relatively comfortable bunkers and with cleared lanes of fire overlooking the barbed wire of their Winter Line. The editors of *Lightning News* certainly knew how to explain the problems the Allies were having here in the Vosges, but they forgot to mention that the Wehrmacht was having all the same troubles, only more so. Their basic premise - that they would hold us at bay for five months at their Vosges Winter Line - had been demolished two days ago by our breakthrough and yesterday's broadening of the penetration at Hill 462.8. The Germans' unexpected withdrawal from the Winter Line position had had the ironic side effect of delivering *Lightning News* to its American readers simply by pulling back and letting it be overrun by the advancing Americans. As to the overall effects of *Lightning News* on our morale, there's nothing an American soldier likes better than a little personal attention. The headquarters staff of U.S. Seventh Army had other pressing priorities at the moment, such as breaking through the Vosges Mountains. These were perhaps considered more urgent than commiserating with the doughboys about the woes of their lives in combat.

So, it took Dr. Goebbels' crew to compose a little "war literature" to pep us up and remind us that somebody knew and appreciated what we were going through. But if Dr. Goebbels had naively assumed the pen to be mightier than the sword, he hadn't counted on the high quality steel being welded by General Burrell, Colonel Tychsen, and their subordinates in the 100th Infantry Division. Just as we finished stuffing copies of *Lightning News* under our shirts for mailing home as souvenirs, the tank crew received the latest *Stars and Stripes*, which they shared with us.

It was older than the 12 November issue of *Lightning News*.

-- From *Into the Mountains Dark: A World War II Odyssey from Harvard Crimson to Infantry Blue*, by Frank Gurley.

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