

Forgotten Memories of World War II

By Sam L. Resnick

Incident Seven: Lucky Me

Many days of combat, walking, digging, followed by guard duty and sleepless nights, tired, weary, sick, hungry, and oh, what the hell. One evening near Bitche, we started to bed down for the night on the slope of a hill. The ground was frozen and it was impossible to dig a hole even two inches deep. We, therefore, kept our sleeping bags on the ground and crawled into them for a much needed sleep. Soon the whining of shells and the barrage of explosions made us dash to the bottom of the hill to take cover in the ditches on the side of the road. We did this once, twice, and then a few more times. This was crazy. We couldn't keep doing this in our weary condition. Too exhausted to care any more, I simply said, "the hell with it" and stayed in my sleeping bag to get some sleep. I rigged up a poncho above me between some tree branches so as to keep off the dew and drizzle.

The cold morning woke me and I squeezed out of the sleeping bag. There were several shrapnel holes through my poncho and a few feet away, I saw a large unexploded shell, partly buried with its nose in the ground. I was afraid to move for fear of setting it off, but quietly and softly as I ever I was, I gathered up my stuff, moved away from the area and then took a good long breath. WOW! How lucky can one guy get?!

Incident Eight: It Can't Work This Way

Although I was attached to the Mortar Platoon of Company D, the heavy weapons company, we were frequently on temporary assignment to the rifle companies at the front due to their high casualty rates. On one such occasion, I was picked to watch over a large open field with a rising slope

from the second story of a deserted barn. It was an important area and I alone had to guard it, day and night.

The machine gun corporal set up a .30-caliber machine gun for me, gave me a few cursory instructions on how to operate it, since I never had any instructions in its use, and left saying that he would return the next day. For two full days, tired and bleary-eyed from straining to see or hear the enemy if they approached, imagining all kinds of movements in the dark, crackling branches and footsteps on the soft grass, and fighting to stay awake, I sat with my "great protector," the .30-caliber gun, waiting for my replacement and wondering whether they had forgotten me. They did, but on the third day, the machine gun platoon sergeant showed up and was much concerned that I was there alone and for almost three days.

He first checked over the gun and said in his harsh angry career-soldier growl, "What the hell is the matter with you, don't you know this gun won't fire the way you have it set up?" I said no and that I hadn't touched anything since it was first set up for me. He relieved me and told me to get back to my platoon, which I readily did. I should have been given training. I thanked somebody that the Germans never did come my way.

Incident Nine: No Trace

Still around the town of Bitche I again was assigned to a rifle company. One bright sunny day, things were rather quiet, that is, no shelling and no direct confrontation with Jerry (the Germans). We were standing and sitting around having a bull session. Suddenly we heard the shelling start coming in. After a few months of combat, we were able to differentiate the shells by their sounds, we could tell what

kind of shell, whether it was from a mortar, artillery gun, SP (self-propelled gun), or from a German *Nebelwerfer*, a rocket gun which fired several, perhaps a dozen, large-diameter shells, probably twelve inches or more. These rocket shells were called "screaming meemies" and we could hear their terrifying screeching sounds several seconds prior to their explosion. They were certainly a demoralizer. Well, to get back to the incident.

We heard the shells coming in and they sounded like they were from large artillery. We dove for cover the moment the shells were heard. We ran, we jumped, we scampered, and tried to find protection amid the broken branches, scattered foxholes, and depressions in the ground. Our bodies hugged the ground curling up to reduce our exposure. Some shells hit the trees, exploding all around us sending shrapnel whistling through the air. Other shells managed to get through without hitting a tree and exploded on the ground. When the shelling stopped, we arose, checked ourselves, and came together again to survey the damage.

Sergeant Tony did not show up and an intensive search on the ground and in the trees did not turn up a piece of cloth or a part of his body. He simply was blown away, nothing remained at all but the memory of his voice and conversation a few minutes before.

Incident Ten: I Could Have Killed Him

I was again up with one of the rifle companies, this time at the very edge of a small wooded area about a few hundred yards from a fortified bunker farmhouse, Freudenberg Farms. The farmhouse overlooked our whole area and menaced our movement in that

area. I was assigned to the very edge of the woods just as it became dusk. Movement there in day time would have certainly been fatal since we were clearly visible.

Two of us were assigned to the fox-hole which, we were told, was the place where two GIs had been killed the night before, and we were their replacements. I noticed the dark splatterings of blood around the hole and I was terrified. I must explain the fox-hole. It didn't deserve to be called a foxhole for it was but a small depression in the ground approximately one foot deep, two feet wide, and three feet long and both of us were supposed to squeeze down into that shallow grave. I was sure the Germans could see us trying to get settled down for the night. I asked Woodie for his knife so as to dig a little deeper, to make the hole slightly larger, so that we could crouch down a bit more, minimizing our exposure.

Woodie was the only one in the platoon that still had his originally-issued knife. He polished it daily and did not use it to open cans or cut wood. It was his security and his alone and was to be used when he so chose. Of course, he wouldn't lend it to me and he wouldn't use it for digging. How stupid can he be! Didn't he know that two guys had been killed here the night before? And the Germans can probably see us even as we argued. It was difficult to argue in a whisper and our voices rose, mostly mine. I made a grab for the knife and we struggled for a moment and then he held it pointed toward me, threatening to use it if I persisted. Stupid, stupid guy!! I could have killed him then and there but I needed to have him with me, I couldn't have been alone in the hole.

I took off my helmet and, crouching as low to the ground as possible, scraped the ground quietly and slowly scooping up handfuls of dirt and rock and piled them in front of the hole facing the farmhouse. I dug through the night, angry and exhausted. Before the

morning light came up, we were evacuated from our position, probably by some wise and clever sergeant. I was much relieved, but my hatred for Woodie was never abated. He treasured his knife more than his life. I, too, felt that a knife was the tool of life and to this day I still carry one with me at all times, albeit a much smaller version that fits on a key chain and contains a small scissor.

We all had been issued shovels and knives, but during combat with its surprising moves, running, stopping, crouching, falling, hiding, etc., they generally got lost in the melee, left behind, or thrown away. The same was true of gas masks which we were issued.

After a few months of lugging that extra weight around, we just simply threw them away, deciding to take our chances if gas was used. As a matter of fact, I threw my mask away but kept the holder for accessories or food that I needed more urgently and more frequently. Life was too immediate, too sudden, too unknown to consider a future possibility of a gas attack, and so we shed many of the issued items. But as for my knife, it probably got lost or left behind, I never would have thrown it away.

Incident Eleven: Clothes Washer?

It was near the town of Bitche, part of the Maginot Line. After much combat, we eventually did take the town and crossed the Maginot Line. This incident relates to one of the forts on that line called Bismark Kaserne. The fortress was several levels underground with huge tunnels interconnecting to other forts, huge enough to contain railroad cars. When we took that fortress, we very cautiously explored the place, but did not venture too far off since other parts of the tunnels were still occupied by Germans.

At one basement level, in what seemed to be a laundry room or kitchen, I discovered a washing

machine. Boy, was I elated, since now I could do all my dirty laundry that I had been carrying along for weeks, or was it months. Anyway, I got my clothes, found some soap which I shaved into small slivers into the tub, and dumped my clothes in. I was proud to be the first one to spot the machine and when I pressed the start button and the water came pouring in, I sat down in satisfaction. I heard the usual sounds of a washing machine, water coming in, draining out, tub spinning. It was a joy.

About a half hour later when the machine stopped and I lifted the lid, my joy turned to utter surprise and dismay. I lifted the clothing up and I saw torn and shredded pieces of cloth, no piece of clothing was whole or recognizable. I was amazed and angry at the stupid washing machine, that's the Germans for you. They probably fixed it so we Americans would have our clothing ruined if we ever overran the caserne. I lifted the last piece of what remained, I believe, one of my undershirts, and noticed the bottom of the tub for the first time, it was rough, intentionally, like very coarse sandpaper but made of metal. Lo and behold, it suddenly dawned on me what that machine was, it was a potato peeler!!!! The potatoes bounced around the bottom and their skins were thoroughly scraped off and then rinsed ready for cooking.

What a jerk I was. How would I explain to the supply sergeant that I needed a whole new set of underwear and fatigues? It would have been hilarious to watch and I'm glad no one saw me. To this day, I automatically touch the bottom of a washing machine every time I use one.

Incident Twelve: The Retreat

In December 1945, the Germans made their big push, they counterattacked. We had our mortars positioned just below the crest of a hill near the town of Bitche and had been there for over

a month. Our foxholes were large and almost comfortable by foxhole standards. The tops were covered with large logs, rocks, and dirt and tilted a bit to allow for water runoff. Inside, the interior was covered with soft pine branches, with shelves carved into the sides for candles, utensils, and other equipment. This one-room apartment was deep enough to allow us to stand up in it as well as sit up on the raised portion constituting our bed. We even had a little drain well which was deeper than the rest of the hole to allow for excess water to drain off. For a better foxhole, always dig a drainage hole. All in all, it was dry, roomy, and, above all, could probably withstand a direct hit of a mortar shell or small artillery shell. I was satisfied and comfortable, although I still had to stand guard duty every night for two hours and it was no fun in winter.

One night, the 117th Reconnaissance Squadron stationed at our right flank and responsible for that area, withdrew without telling us and so our flank was completely exposed. About mid-afternoon of the next day, the Germans came through the valley and the hillside behind us and opened up with everything they had, bazookas, rifles, machine guns, and God knows what else. I could see the bullets hitting the ground around me, making little spurts of dirt kick up as they dug into the ground inches from me. I fell flat and hugged the ground hoping they wouldn't see me but, of course, we were all clearly visible and they had taken us by surprise. Few of us had our weapons with us.

They were laying around someplace, after all it had been very quiet for some time and who would have suspected a German breakthrough. As I lay flat, I saw others diving behind wooden crates which formerly held the mortar shells we used. I thought, how senseless, those crates wouldn't stop anything, what kind of protection was that? Why are they all diving behind the boxes? My foxhole was too

far away and there was none other close to run to. I just wanted to be one with the earth and sink in as deep as I could but being on a slope, I was an easy target. I tried not to breathe. The shooting soon stopped and I turned around and saw them, dozens of little men scurrying through the woods across from me and more kept coming, attempting to encircle us. We left everything there, all the comforts we had set up during our brief stay, our mortars as well, and just grabbed our rifles and ran. I was confused, is it possible that we were retreating, the American Army? Where was everybody, all the big guns, equipment, men, why were we abandoned?

On the road back, I saw that our company was not alone, hundreds were retreating, confused, lost, and unbelieving. What happened? The lieutenant in charge of our platoon was young and inspired by duty, interrupted my questions and told us to go back to get our mortars despite the fact that the area was now overrun by Germans. We all refused at first, but then at his insistence, and with his hand on his pistol, we all turned around and headed back. Those retreating looked at us as if to say, "Are you guys crazy?" We ran back, grabbed our respective mortar components, in my case it was the barrel, another took the bipod, but the baseplate was frozen in the ground and could not be removed. They were still shooting at us, making the circle even tighter. We managed somehow to evade them and safely joined up with the rest of our company walking toward the rear. I walked dejectedly, frequently glancing behind me. Sergeant Hall, I remember, grabbed a jeep and started to go back to pick up a .50-caliber machine gun. Despite the fact that we pleaded with him not to go, he went anyway. We never saw him or his jeep again.

About one month later when we had recovered from our confusing retreat, consolidated ourselves, and renewed

our advance, we returned to the same area. And there were our baseplates as we had left them, still frozen into the ground.

On with the War

My six or seven months in combat is not, of course, completely detailed by the preceding incidents, nor do they encompass my total experience. They simply serve, I hope, to provide a sampling, a taste, of what it was like and the emotions involved. During these days it was combat as usual. How does one describe combat days in common, usual terms? Mostly I was with the 81 mm mortars and generally behind the front lines below the crest of a hill.

Frequently I was sent up to reinforce the rifle troops which always had large casualties. There was a constant routine in combat, although always different; shooting, being shot at, diving for cover, digging in, staying awake for guard duty, rushing, and waiting. We were always cold, dirty, tired, weary, sleepy, frightened, hungry, thirsty, and frustrated and angry at not knowing where we were, where the Germans were, where the front was, where we were going, and the seeming stupidity of our officers who bore the brunt of all this anger. We lived like animals in the ground and felt more like them than humans. I remember on Christmas Day 1944, I was up with a rifle platoon when we got a treat from the kitchen jeep which drove up to our area that day. Normally, we ate cans of C rations and anything from the kitchen, hot or cold, greasy or dry, powdered or not, was welcome. This time we each got one cold hamburger which was most satisfying. We also received two small pieces of chocolate, like those from a box of chocolates. I slowly savored those chocolates and made them last as long as I could. I wanted nothing else but one more piece of chocolate, just one more, but there were no more. In the dead of