

# Forgotten Memories of World War II

By Sam L. Resnick

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It seems to me that memories do not come in a continuing chronological sequence, one recall following upon the other. They do come as separate events, some linked together by a common place or timeframe, evoked and jarred into reality by some present-day happening, place, face, or word, or else specifically called forth from our memorable memory bank. Why do we recall certain events and not others? Some of these recollections appear trivial, other of major import, yet we remember them all as vividly. It seems to me that even some insignificant memories are truly significant, although we do not know how they fit into or effect the total scheme of our life, nor can we objectively explain their "recallability."

Are these memories actual events, or mere figments of our imagination, perceptions fueled by often told stories so that we have adopted them into our real world of memory to be recalled and repeated as if they are true?

Further, how much of our memories have retained their originality and how much have we embellished and seasoned to our taste in the retelling? Do we hide in the recesses of our mind the bad, the horrible, and the unacceptable, or do these readily become available but are suppressed as we choose not to bring them forth?

Yet as I think back on my World War II experiences, the amusing ones come forth easily for the retelling, but yet the others are there. I know them well, and can bring them out when desired, as I have now.

These memories, forgotten memories, are here put down as I strive to

elicit them in whatever context they are; boring, humorous, trivial, or recognizably emotionally important. I offer you vignettes of tragedy, fear, anger, sadness, sorrow, and festering rawness on one side of the scale, and on the other, smiles, snickers, laughter, and the wonderful feeling of just being alive.

## Fort Bragg and the 100th Infantry Division

Basic training at Fort Bragg left me with few memories, although I can picture some of the events. I do remember the interminable heat, the red clay of North Carolina, and the difficulty of digging a foxhole in that clay.

I recall an incident at Fort Bragg that must have had an effect upon my trust in newly-appointed officers. The memory is vivid and bitter. We were to make a night march, using maps and compass to reach a designated spot. The night was pitch black and we had to hold onto each other and follow the GI in front blindly with trust. At one point we reached a stream, a deep stream. The lieutenant in charge ordered us to go directly into the stream, which we hesitatingly did, not knowing how deep or cold it was. And of course it was both—icy cold and we were actually up to our necks. That was bad enough, but since we still had a way to go after we crossed the stream, we were absolutely furious being cold and wet throughout the rest of the march until we finally made it back to our barracks early in the morning. What a night! A few days later, a couple of us had occasion to go back to the area of the crossing and, lo and behold, we found that there was a small bridge crossing the stream not more than one hundred yards away. Oh, were we angry! That lieutenant, presumably with a map, never had the foresight to check up and down the

stream for an easier crossing or a bridge.

## The "Wave"

One impression I have of the voyage over was that of the "Wave." Picture, if you will, a group of about seven GIs sitting along a fifteen-foot trough, which constituted the toilet. There were no individual booths—God forbid—and so this communal trough was our toilet. Picture also the rolling of the ship and the waste material going from one end of the trough to the other as the ship rolled. You can imagine the consequences if one did not rise up when your end of the ship and the contents of the trough dipped to the low end of the roll. And so in consonance with the roll of the ship, the men at the trough did the "wave," the forerunner of the present-day wave seen at sport stadiums.

Some fourteen days later we arrived at Marseilles, but since the port and docks had been destroyed and we were the first ship to land there, we had to disembark through a half-sunken ship climbing through the decks at a forty-five-degree angle until we reached shore and solid ground. As soon as we had settled and everyone was accounted for, we started our trek north into the unknown land, our hearts filled with frightened anxieties.

## Incident One: The First Casualty

After landing on October 20, 1944 in Marseilles, we proceeded northward to our staging area somewhere in this strange land. During this night trek through the unknown roads, towns, and forests, the blackness was black, no moon, no street lights, simply nothingness but muffled voices and occasional curses of the stumbling GIs. We marched tired, weary, hungry, with our fully equipped backpacks, our

ever-present burdens, into the void, trusting only the one in front whom we could not see. We moved along, trying to imagine the road we were on from the sound of our feet on the ground, reaching for and touching the pack of the one in front for assurances, sometimes forming a chain, a linking of humanity, by holding onto our handkerchiefs. Every hour or so, we stopped for a break, dropping to the ground, feeling on either side of us for the assuring bodies of our buddies. Whether we closed our eyes to rest or kept them open made no difference, since we could see nothing. Suddenly, from the stillness of the night, we heard a frightening scream, which faded into a sudden thud, followed by painful moaning. Had we encountered the enemy and was one of our guys knifed or strangled? Fear started to swell within me, but it was soon calmed when word was passed down along the line that one man from our company had been sitting on the railing of a small bridge and, leaning back, had tumbled to the dry creek bed below. Despite the fact that someone was hurt, I was relieved. This was our first war casualty, a portent of many more to come.

Looking back now on that event as well as our trek northward from Marseilles, I realize that a new sensation was developing within me and one that would continue during the war—FEAR. Sure, I've had my normal everyday fears up to that time, fear of failing in school, fear of getting punished, fear of falling, and other fears which I can now label as small fears. But another fear was developing—a fear of the unknown, the blackness, the strange noises of the woods—the snapping of a twig, the rustle of the leaves, and even the stillness of the night—the thunder, the bark of guns, rockets, and bombs and the terrifying scampering to hide like animals from them. Every little shadow, every little bush or branch that moved in the breeze was a crawling

German. It was a fear that was constantly lingering in the background, ready to assume monstrous proportions and take over my very emotions and behaviors. The well-known fight or flight survival concept plays an almost total role in the behavior patterns at the front, in combat. Fear was to be my constant companion, day and night, together with fatigue—a worthy and complementary companion. Later on they were joined by hunger, the constant hunger pangs. Yes, I ate raw potatoes, soup made from grass and water with a sprinkling of salt and pepper, also snails thrown onto a fire so they got burnt and stringy and pulling them from their shells was like cleaning my nose. I managed to swallow them with crackers.

### **Incident Two: The Lady on the Radio**

After the long night march from Marseilles, we reached our staging area in some woods, near some town in southern France. Prior to our leaving the States, tight security had been imposed. Our uniform patches were removed, letters were censored, identifying marks removed from all vehicles and equipment; nothing remained to indicate what division, regiment, or company we were.

One evening sitting around in the dark listening to the radio from a staff car parked nearby, since we were still far from the front, we heard our favorite American music and popular songs. It was nice, I thought getting that from the states or from England. Abruptly the music ended with the announcement by a sweet-voiced woman, "The men of the 100th Division are welcome to France and I hope that you have a good night's sleep on the outskirts of the village of (name not recalled) because you will need all of your strength tomorrow." We were frightened in those woods, in the darkness, with all of our security, with the protection and precautions of the US Army, we had fooled everyone

including ourselves, but not the lady on the radio, Axis Sally. We were to hear from her quite often and each time, it demoralized us a bit more, although at times she did let us know where we were and where we were going and against whom we would be fighting—some solace after all, something to diminish the dreadful, unknowing fear. We were sure that others knew where we were even though we didn't know ourselves. We felt helpless in the clutch of an unseen and unknown enemy.

### **Incident Three: Lucky Strike-Cigaret**

We left the staging area to go into combat heading north to Rambervillers, LaSalle, and Raon L'Etape, only twenty-five days from the time we left the States—some kind of record, I think. One night we slept in an abandoned farmhouse and settled for the night. We received our guard duty schedule and passwords as every night. The passwords were composed of two words, the first to be stated by the challenger and the second word by the one challenged. That night, the code words were "Lucky Strike" and "Cigaret." Whitey was on guard duty from 12 AM to 2 AM in front of the house and he had a machine gun. Another was at the rear, similarly equipped. We settled down on the floor, feeling fairly secure and comfortable in our shelter and sleeping bags. Suddenly the stillness was shaken by the yelling of "Lucky Strike-Cigaret" and a burst of machine gun fire. We all awoke and dashed toward the front of the house. Looking out we saw nothing and there was no noise or movement. We chided Whitey about his challenging passwords, since he said both, his nervous and premature shooting and returned to sleep. The next morning, we awoke to find the challenger to his position was a stray cat.

