

XXII. SOME REFLECTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

A brief digression seems in order here. Considering what we now know—and think, and fear—about the atomic age, it is somewhat amazing to me to realize that I can't recall attaching any particular significance to the bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki—beyond the far from insignificant relationship the bombings seemed to have with the end of the war, that is. I was profoundly grateful for that, so much so that I suppose I was blinded to anything else at the time.

What I do recall from that time is my fear and distress at the talk that seemed to start up almost immediately, perhaps more at home than in Europe, that it would be good for us to continue moving while we had manpower and momentum, and push back the Russians. It was beyond my comprehension then—and it is still—why anyone would want to start up all that horror and destruction again once it was stopped. I remember deep-seated gut fear and apprehension that it might actually happen. I can't believe that the people talking that way then had any conception of just how massive the Russian war machine was, and how much more they'd had to do with destroying the German resistance than we had. Of course I was not taking the bomb into consideration, because I had no clear conception of what it was. However, I wonder how many other people were either, back in those confused days. All I remember thinking then was that the war was over, that I was extremely gratified to have survived in one piece, and that I wanted it to stay over.

Bud Stimes directed our attention to a book that gave us some interesting information that we quoted in a *Newsletter* article:

CASUALTIES

We have at hand some information on World War II casualties in infantry and armored divisions excerpted by Bud Stimes from a book entitled *Closing With the Enemy – How G.I.'s Fought the War in Europe, 1944–1945*, by Michael D. Doubler. We quote from the book:

“... By May of 1945 American forces in the ETO included forty-six infantry and seven armored divisions. Between D-Day and V-E Day stretched

337 days, during which many divisions endured near continuous commitment to battle. Half the infantry divisions spent over 150 days in combat, and 40 percent spent 200 days or more. Two divisions saw more than 300 days of action. The 2nd Division marched across Omaha Beach on 8 June and went on to spend an incredible 303 days in battle. The 90th Division saw its first fight in Normandy and in a stormy combat career managed to accumulate 308 days of combat, the highest of any division in the ETO. The armored divisions also had to endure long periods under fire. Of the fifteen armored divisions in the ETO, four saw more than 200 days of battle.”

A chart accompanying the text contains some interesting comparisons. The 100th Division, for instance, with 163 days in combat suffered 4,770 battle casualties and 7,425 non-battle. The Battle casualties are in the average range for the number of combat days. However, the non-battle figure is very high, and it raises our total casualty turnover to 86.7%, which is also high. The interesting part of this is that, while our non-battle rate was over 60% of our total, only 12 other divisions had non-battle casualty totals higher than their battle casualties. Six of these divisions: 3rd, 36th, 44th, 45th, 70th, and 103rd were in the Seventh Army. In only one of these, the 45th, was the non-battle rate substantially higher than that for battle; in that case, also about 60% of the total. What conclusion can be drawn from this? Spending the winter in the Vosges Mountains was very unhealthy, even when we were not being shot at! Fellow yellow jaundice (Type A hepatitis it's called these days) victims take heart; we were not alone! My favorite division to have been in was the 13th: no combat, no casualties of any kind. My least favorite is a tie between the 4th: 229 days of combat, 35,545 casualties, 252.3%; and the ill-fated 106th: 63 days of combat, 10,671 casualties, 75.7%. The 4th had 118 casualties per day of combat, the 106th a staggering 169! (We may recall that the 106th, completely green, took the main initial thrust of the Battle of the Bulge for their baptism of fire.) By contrast, the 100th's daily average was 53.

As I look back over what I have written, and think about some other things I have read, it seems to me that something more ought to be said here about training. In his wonderfully readable book *Citizen Soldiers*, Stephen E. Ambrose has a chapter titled “Replacements and Reinforcements” that is in essence an indictment of the training duration and methods for soldiers sent to the ETO in 1944 and 1945. He states unequivocally that in this aspect of fighting the war the US Army failed completely. He offers many examples to support his contention, and I suppose many of them are true, even perhaps most of them. However, I cannot help feeling that the experience of the 100th Division—and I can only assume of many men trained in the Division before we went overseas *en masse*—must at least be a partial exception to his contention, if not an outright refutation. How could anyone read Bud Stimes' letters from Fort Bragg and think we were not well and thoroughly trained? Just reading about some of that today brings on thoughts of exhaustion.

We did not appear on the front lines as untrained, unmotivated, and hopelessly confused victims, which is the picture Ambrose presents. On the contrary, we were a

cohesive, and in the final analysis, really superbly trained military unit. And it showed. Though we were not suddenly exposed to horrific, disastrous situations, as were the Divisions who landed in Normandy at D-Day whose initial combat experience it was, or, later, the 106th Division, one of whose early assignments was to attempt to repulse the initial German attack in the Battle of the Bulge, we were given a wartime combat assignment, and one which we carried out well. I cannot speak personally to the experiences of our replacements, but I do remember that we were always glad to have them—they were always desperately needed—that they were useful (two of Company G's were awarded the DSC, as noted above) even if not always highly skilled in the beginning, and that many of them became, and remain, firm friends.

As a matter of fact, this treatise has, I think, in some respects turned out to be a tribute to the training that we of the 100th Division at least—and I cannot believe our experience was unique—received before we were thrust into the maelstrom of war. I never intended it that way when I started to write, because the memory of being humiliated and debased by much of the training is still quite vivid, and I had a strong resentment of all that, vestiges of which I still cannot help feeling. But that was an unavoidable—for me, at least—part of being young. Mature reflection tells another story. Almost every humiliation, and certainly all physical exertions, no matter how onerous, turned out in the event to be useful, and in combat “useful” could mean survival.

Indeed, Keith E. Bonn, in *his* excellent book *When the Odds Were Even*, subtitled “The Vosges Mountains Campaign, October 1944–January 1945,” has this to say about the training of units in the Seventh Army:

“The training afforded the units that fought in the Vosges Mountains varied widely in quantity and quality, and had a major impact on the outcome of the campaign. In the latter stages of World War II, both sides were forced to commit as replacements soldiers whose initial training and military experience suited them primarily for other roles. The American system was far superior in retraining such personnel and welding them into effective fighting forces, however.”

As a matter of fact, Ambrose, in making his generalizations, seems to dismiss the Seventh Army almost completely. Though his book purports to be the story of the American effort in Western Europe in the last months of the war, it is really mostly about the First and Third Armies. The Seventh Army and its role are largely ignored. It is certainly true that the exploits of the First and Third Armies were more dramatic (often more *dramatized*)—and sometimes bloodier—than those of the Seventh, but we were there, it was wartime combat, and what we did and how we did it was significant. Bonn's viewpoint—and conclusion, regarding training at least—is different, and I believe more accurate.

One more reflection seems pertinent here. In his highly detailed and eminently readable book, *One Day In A Very Long War*, the British military historian John Ellis points out that on the “Day” he writes about, October 25, 1944, American military presence in the ETO totaled 2,204,000 men. (We were sitting in a mud hole near Marseilles on that date.) By the end of that October battle casualties had added up to 190,000, of whom 56,260 had been killed. However, the huge majority of the casualties had been inflicted on the 250 infantry battalions present at the time, in which there were

only 214,000 men. Not only do we see, then, that there were in Europe no less than nine support troops for each of us front-line infantrymen, but Ellis goes on to point out that even taking into account the influx of replacements, infantry casualties were at the rate of 56 percent, including 17 percent killed in action. I remember feeling, when I was an infantryman, that there was no possibility for me to be anything else. There was a sort of fatalism about it, I suppose. Now I wonder what force lined up ten men, in effect, and appointed only one of them to serve in the infantry—forever. Even with wounded men, as we have seen, unless they were permanently incapacitated the pressure was on to get them right back where they came from as soon as possible. Why couldn't we have at least taken turns—with so many to take turns with?

It might have worked too. Here's one last Company G story that somehow seems related to this thesis. Once, in the early weeks of 1945, a replacement was assigned to us who identified himself as Lonnie Jackson, a "red clay hillbilly from Arkansas." Shortly after he joined our platoon he informed us that, until very recently, he had been assigned to the Quartermaster Corps in England. He had been caught and convicted of dealing in the black market with Government supplies. He informed us with no little glee that for punishment he had been offered a choice of a prison term or transfer to the infantry. He had, of course, chosen the latter. "I know why I'm here," he told a group of us one day, "I'm a convicted criminal being punished. Why are *you* here?" This was a question we had difficulty answering, and took scant pleasure pondering, but he was so good-natured about it that no one took offense. And it turned out that he was in the right place, apparently. He really seemed almost to enjoy the life, and some few weeks later, in our last real combat action, near Talheim, he managed to earn the Distinguished Service Cross.

Well, so ends the saga of G Company, a tale twice told that probably will not be told again. It's a tiny part of a huge panorama, the history of World War II, but I believe, a not insignificant part. No story from a time of such overwhelming events is without meaning, nor, I think, not worth telling. I can only hope that this one has been told well enough here to have made it worth following from its start to its finish. My own "Good War" chronicle still had some months to go to reach its end.