

would neglect to awaken his buddy until he had assured himself that some imagined irregularity was not a potential disaster. And every so often we'd be rudely awakened by a burst of fire from his B.A.R. or a grenade hurled at some insignificant noise, probably imagined most of the time. We managed to get used to that after a while, but it was upsetting at first.

One day it snowed most of the day, and by nightfall there was a fresh coating of white over everything. Then, in the early dark a full moon rose over a landscape of brilliant white and jet-black shadows. We learned in the morning something that really surprised no one, I suppose, though it did seem most bizarre. Our replacement had sat in his hole the whole night through staring at the shadow of a small tree he was convinced was a man. He never saw it move, but he couldn't believe it might not, so he sat there for perhaps 10 hours, staring and waiting. In the morning, with some skepticism, we learned that he was actually suffering from snow blindness! Snow blindness at night? It could actually happen, we were assured, though it certainly was rare.

He was led back to our Division rest camp for treatment. After a few days there, and possibly consultation with a psychiatrist, it was decided that he should stay there permanently, as part of the rest camp staff. Envy was the reaction of most of us when we heard this, but hardly anyone did not feel that he had certainly earned the rest. He slept far less than half as much as the rest of us, and when we moved around he carried far more than four times the load we did. So much for that, we thought.

But no, not so. Scarcely a week passed before he came walking up the path to Company headquarters one day. He looked terrible, he'd lost weight, and he almost staggered under the weight of his pack. He was a country boy, he said, and couldn't stand living in the "city" where the rest camp was—a hamlet whose population certainly didn't exceed 5,000—so he'd gone "over the hill" to get back to us. He'd tucked a couple of bottles of cognac for the platoon in that great pack, so we weren't totally unable to welcome him back. Over the course of a little time most of the contents of the pack got distributed to others or discarded, and it wasn't long until his pack was much like everyone else's. His dramatic sense of alertness and constant apprehension was dulled too, and eventually he settled into a state of neurosis no worse than most of the rest of us, most of the time.

## **XVI. A FRIEND**

Patrol action from this place was frequent: at least we went out on a lot of patrols, we assumed the Germans did too, though we never made any actual contact here. But *shu minen* (shoe mines) were a source of constant concern as we moved about, for we

were in territory recently vacated by the enemy, and they used a lot of them. These were small explosive devices buried just under the surface of the ground and detonated by pressure on a metal plate that was easily concealed. The weight of a man's body was enough for detonation.

One day after an unusually quiet week a squad from our First Platoon moved through our area on a rare daylight patrol. We laughed and joked with them as they passed through our positions, and then thought little more about them. We heard a series of small, far-off explosions some time later, but they seemed hardly noticeable at that time and place—until a runner came hurrying back out of the woods the patrol had entered, that is. They had encountered shoe mines, there were casualties, and help was needed carrying them in. This was one of the rare times that I moved in the open on the front line without fear, as we rushed to help.

I only remember two of the injured, and now I don't recall if there were more than two. I found myself on the corner of a makeshift litter helping to carry a man to whom I had become very close over the few months we had known each other. His right foot at my corner of the litter was completely blown away. He was conscious and kept repeating over and over, "I fucked up, I fucked up." I tried to assure him that he had not, but I doubt that he heard me, or that he really knew what had happened to him. I hope not. He died a few minutes later at Company headquarters, waiting for an ambulance. The other wounded man, the sergeant leading the patrol, had the exact same injury. He was sitting up on his litter, apparently perfectly aware of what had happened, and very actively directing the withdrawal and the handling of the litters. He was a truly remarkable person. No doubt he was in shock, but that didn't interfere with his sense of duty and leadership. He survived.

The man who died was my friend. Combat soldiers are physically and emotionally close to one another, to an extent. They need and rely upon one another, and they share much—mostly trauma, fear, and misery, but good times too. But in no way, any more than in any other situation are they all real friends. That man was my friend. I don't recall when we first met, but we were close companions by the time we reached France. It was he who went with me on the expedition to Aix that we both enjoyed so much. He was a little older than I, I think, and intelligent, articulate, gentle, and very courageous. He suffered from osteomyelitis, he told me, and the cold, dampness and physical strains of our life were often torture to him. He was in the infantry through some administrative foul-up; he was supposed to be on limited duty. I think I was the only person to whom he confided this; I hope I was able a little to help him bear it. He refused to complain officially, and doggedly stuck it out with the rest of us, not wanting to let anyone down or to be thought not doing his share. Certainly he deserved better than a useless death on an idiot patrol that in the end served no purpose. I missed him then and I still miss him when I think of those days.