

happened. The melting and leaking of the day had reached their natural climax, and we had no more hole.

After mutual solicitations and inquiries disclosed that none of the three of us had been hurt, I realized that I was completely buried and unable to move. I requested to be gotten out of this, and damned fast, please. It was at this unfortunate point that the humor of the situation became manifest to my buddies, they not being buried of course. Between my loudly voiced imprecations and their laughter and indignation at being sworn at, it was a good 20 minutes before I was extricated, much ruffled but unharmed. Relations between three of us were somewhat cool for the next few hours.

## **XV. A REPLACEMENT**

Something happened here that I wrote another short sketch about in the 1950s. This one is adapted a little for readability:

He came to us one morning on the chow Jeep. We'd been in this position for several days now, so the Jeep managed to get to us regularly at least once a day, often twice, with hot food, mail, ammunition, and—very rarely—replacements. Our Division had been on the line in and near France's Vosges Mountains since early November, 1944. At first we had moved fairly rapidly through woods and tiny villages, having frequent small but brisk firefights with slowly retreating German troops. Now it was February, and we had established a front around the first of the year near the Maginot Line that had remained static for several weeks. We exchanged desultory mortar fire with the enemy, and each side probed the other's defenses from time to time with small patrols. Snow lay deep on the ground, and it was cold.

We'd had moderately heavy casualties in our early days of combat, and casualties continued, even at a reduced rate, in our more stable position. Illness had taken its toll as well: trench foot, hepatitis, influenza, had all claimed their victims and, since replacements had been infrequently sent to us, we were down to perhaps one-

third of our authorized strength. So any replacement was welcome, but this one, we quickly learned, was special; beyond physical reinforcement, he brought entertainment, which was in very short supply. We knew he was going to be special the first time we saw him. He was an enormous man, well over six feet tall, large in every way, but with bone and muscle, not fat. He had no fat. But he almost fell as he got out of the Jeep under the weight of an enormous backpack, stuffed to the bursting point with equipment.

We all had these packs, and we had all been issued what was supposed to go in them; blankets, shelter halves, extra clothing, spare boots, mess kits, emergency rations, entrenching tools, the list went on—and the weight increased accordingly. Long ago most of us had stripped ourselves to the real bare essentials: enough clothing to keep warm—most of which we wore all the time, day and night—our weapons and ammunition, hand grenades, and not much else. If our bedrolls didn't catch up with us at night, along with food in some guise, we did without. Foxhole buddies carried real shovels—entrenching tools were useless—but only one for every two people at the most.

It became quite obvious at once that our out-sized replacement was proud of his pack and what was in it, and felt it a privilege to be able to carry it. It quickly became obvious too that he was an example of what we would have called in those days a “rube” or “hillbilly,” two sobriquets that don't have much meaning any more. He claimed he was part Indian. But even though unworldly, he had been, apparently, not without ability to function well in his own milieu. He told us he was a ranch owner in Montana—in Idaho—and in Washington. He was unclear about the details, but assured us he did own ranches. He was semi-literate at best, and he said he was having big trouble with his wife. She was trying to sell all the ranches, and then divorce him. At least, that was what he thought; he had considerable difficulty interpreting her letters.

All that notwithstanding, however, his characteristic that made the biggest impression on us was his gung-ho attitude to what we were doing there. He took it all very, very seriously. Well, we all did that, I guess, but the way most of us dealt with it was far different from his. He seemed to have the attitude that it all depended on him. The eagerness to have his pack contents complete, as officially designated, was symptomatic of that, but even more so was his activity when he was actually on the line, in his foxhole. There he seemed to feel that everything depended on his alertness, all of the time, to the possibility of enemy appearing, like Indians, having stealthily and invisibly crept up on us. We'd been there a while, and though we knew there were Germans within artillery range, at least, there had been no evidence of their ever having come any closer. We told him this, but it made no impression.

This extreme caution and alertness manifested itself in several ways. The most significant, I think, turned out to be his behavior at night. Our rule at night was that in each foxhole one occupant should be awake at all times. This was accomplished, of course, by the two “foxhole buddies” taking turns, usually hourly, one awake and the other asleep. On a quiet front like this we sometimes cheated a little bit by combining the force of two holes so that we could each have as much as three hours of unbroken sleep while still having one of us awake. Never our Montana replacement, though. He barely trusted the one man with him, and could never have composed himself for as much as three hours of sleep. He had trouble enough with one hour. As often as not, he

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