

previous experience, that they expected us to advance in front of them and to cover them from anti-tank fire. We were a while that morning sorting that out, but our way finally prevailed. Two of the three tanks were quickly rendered useless, however: one had engine problems, another got stuck and threw a track, and the crew of the third would not advance alone. So we had to.

The way up the hill when we got there was so steep and narrow that we had to struggle up single-file, a very perilous maneuver. However, word soon came back from those in the lead that the enemy position, though nearly impregnable, with this hill on one side and a mine field in a pasture on the other, was very lightly held and the Germans didn't have the heart to fight for it. They had surrendered! But just before I reached the position there was a burst of gunfire. B.A.R. fire, it turned out, and when I got there a German soldier lay face down in the dirt in a flowing pool of brilliant red blood. After surrendering, he had not been able to resist taunting our men, in fluent English. The war was over for him, he had said, and no doubt he'd be sent to the States as a pampered prisoner of war, while we had to stay there in the wet and filth and probably die. This snapped something in the mind of one of my fellow B.A.R. men who was standing a few feet away. He just raised his weapon and pulled the trigger. About half the 20-round clip must have hit home and death was surely instantaneous. I was horrified and revulsed, but our friend showed no sign of remorse, or that he necessarily considered himself finished shooting, so no one said anything.

This was, in a sense, cold-blooded murder, though probably mitigated by something like temporary insanity, and certainly, given the circumstances, provoked. Memories of this episode returned to me at the time, many years later, when the details of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam were being revealed. Undoubtedly there was a difference between the two happenings, and indeed between them and the Malmédy massacre of American troops by their German captors that was to take place only a few weeks later, and not many miles from where we stood then. But the differences were of degree, not kind, and all these episodes simply underline the dehumanizing horror of war.

XIII. ALSACE

The attitude of most of the local populace toward us, in the limited time we had to observe it, often seemed ambivalent. This was France, and our orders were to treat the people as friends—allies. Complete respect was to be shown to personal property, and when we occupied homes it was, technically at least, as guests. The occupants stayed in their homes and made do as best they could. We were never long in any one place. However, this was also Alsace. From 1872 to 1918 it had been a part of Germany, and it had again been occupied by Germans since 1940. Many people spoke German as well as French, and local patios seemed to be a mixture of both languages. It was by no means to be taken for granted that all of the people were totally committed to the Allied

cause, and indeed we were sometimes greeted with coolness and viewed, perhaps, with more fear than joy. Most likely, though, I usually thought this was just a perfectly natural and understandable reaction to having an army, friendly or not, visited on the community.

An occurrence illustrates something of this atmosphere. The village, maybe it was Lemberg—we seemed to be in and out of there a lot for a while—was somewhat larger than the tiny mountain hamlets we'd gotten used to; it would qualify as a small town. We'd moved in at mid-morning and were deployed to houses on the central streets. It looked like a comfortable spot for a well-earned respite. Our squad was assigned to a home occupied by a gruff and taciturn elderly man and two women, possibly his wife and a sister. None of them spoke any English. We entered the house through a small back yard in which a prominent feature was three cages holding large rabbits. The house was clean and warm, the furniture soft and comfortable, and, since we'd been told to hold off settling in pending further orders, I suppose most of us sank into a semi-doze, which is what we usually did whenever we waited for something to happen. We were a little apprehensive about these people, for they had not really acted very friendly, so we did not arrange ourselves for sound sleep—which we easily could have, any kind of sleep being in permanent short supply.

Suddenly, after some time had passed, there was a stir at the door to the kitchen and the two women appeared with a huge pot of some sort of meaty stew, indicating that it was for us. We ate it gratefully, finding “home cooking” a welcome change from Army chow. A few minutes after we had finished off this bonanza, orders came to move out. Naturally, we weren't going to stay there very long. Too nice. Probably slated for Regimental headquarters. As we left, out the back way again, the first thing we saw was three fresh, dripping skins nailed to a barn door, and three empty rabbit cages. Our stew! Some of us may have felt a little queasy, but it had been delicious, and surely it showed that we were more welcome than official caution would have it. The rabbits were doubtless to be an important part of those people's Winter diet, and the gift of them represented real gratitude for our presence. At least, so it seemed to me.

Here is another anecdote, culled—as was the above—from the sketches I wrote in the early 1950s. This one got into the *Newsletter* once when I was getting short of material:

ENEMY?

[The *locale of this story was a small village called Plaine de Walsch a couple of weeks later—December 1944.*]

The division was in Corps reserve for a few days in the early part of December, resting up—as we learned later—for a drive on the Maginot Line fortress of Bitche, which was to be our next objective. [As we know now, this drive was later postponed until March, because of the German counter-attack in the Bulge, to the north of us.]

We'd been continually oriented during the past week or so that now we were getting into a part of Alsace where the people were predominantly German sympathizers. We were to be billeted in houses for a while, and in accordance with the Army policy in France, the owners would stay in the houses too—which they didn't in Germany later—but we were to watch our step now.

This was the flat Alsatian plain country and the village our Company was assigned to, a few kilometers south of Sarrebourg, was like all the rest: small and dirty. The squad stopped outside the house assigned to us while the squad leader informed the owner that we were to be his guests for a few days. Our sergeant came back looking a little crestfallen and told us that the burgher hadn't been told of any such arrangement. He was extremely busy right then anyway, but he would condescend to speak with an officer. Apparently the other squads were having similar trouble, so while we waited in the drizzle our platoon leader was found and the initial difficulty settled.

Our landlord decided we could have his guestroom and the hayloft, but only on the condition that there be no smoking in the hay, and that we would take good care of his furniture. He was a typically German appearing character of about 60, large, stolid, and stocky. His wife, the only other occupant of the house, was a meek little woman who spoke when she was spoken to. What was keeping him so busy was soon revealed by our prying eyes to be a small still in a shed in the back yard where he was making schnapps, the German national drink, the distillation of which was the occupation of about 80% of the farmers of Germany and eastern France in the Fall. The other 20% and the city dwellers helped them drink it the rest of the year.

The people spoke a strange, singsong patois neither German nor French, which contains elements not much related to either tongue, I'm convinced. [*This seems a gratuitous description of a language I knew, and know, nothing about.*] However, the old man also spoke French, which a number of us were slightly conversant in.

We hadn't been in the house long when he came storming up the stairs, red in the face and muttering to himself, to the guest room, where those of us lucky enough to be there were bickering over who was to get the bed the first night. As it was the first bed we'd seen since we left the boat in Marseilles six long weeks before, it was quite an important question.

Since I was the only one of the five of us who could understand any French it was suggested I deal with our host. It turned out he had been mortally insulted. Some of the other boys in the platoon had gotten wind of his still and had the effrontery to want to buy some of his schnapps! Some of his very best schnapps, mind you, that he very seldom sold at all and then only for the equivalent of about \$40 a liter—which was probably a lie, even the Germans couldn't like the miserable stuff that much.

Anyway, my intervention in this problem so mollified the old gentleman that he informed me he would let two or three of us at a time come down to the kitchen and wash and heat our rations in the evening, if we so desired. Later he sent his wife up to us with a bowl of nuts and several varieties of fine apples, which were a great treat to our K- and C-Ration famished stomachs.

A day or so later when three of us were taking our, by then, regular sojourn by the kitchen stove, he brought out his greatest treat and the solace of his old age, so he claimed: steaming cups of herb tea, each laced with a good healthy slug of fresh green schnapps. If ever more nauseating potion was devised by man, I hope I never see it, much less drink it. We forced it down for

fear we might hurt his feelings otherwise, and after a trip to the latrine, we felt fairly normal again. Firm relations were cemented, however, and most of us rested serenely, unhaunted by fear of fanatical Nazis knifing us in our sleep.

Indeed, we developed such solid relations that when mine host caught me raiding his apple bins deep in the basement a few minutes before we left, early in the morning a few days later, he let me escape with the rather ridiculous explanation that I was just looking for him to thank him for his kindness and to say good-bye.

XIV. WINTER CAMPAIGN (2)

Some time during the middle of December all of us who were still privates got the news that we were promoted to private first class. Then, a few days later, we were all awarded the Combat Infantry Badge, new at that time. We scoffed at these things and