

AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

40. ATTACK AT ST. REMY

Rain and the drumbeat of shellfire continues night and day. Rain is our constant companion, and dry feet become a major goal. When trench foot sends a first platoon ammo bearer to the hospital, I am sent to take his place, joining the platoon as it moves through the woods to a new position.

We are issued K-rations, extra ammunition and grenades while we wait through the afternoon.

Under cover of darkness, we move quietly out of the woods along the reverse side of a long, gentle, grass covered hill; we dig foxholes and point our weapons to our left, up the hill. Sounds from exploding shells and small arms fire confirm reports that Germans are in that direction.

Riflemen of Item Company, the Greyhounds, are posted in pairs, about twenty yards apart; their positions extend back into the woods from whence we came, now on our left, and ahead to another woods, now on our right. We quickly dig in to form a long line of foxholes. The other machine gun from our section is similarly spaced between riflemen farther down the line.

The two gunners dig in behind the gun. Squad leader and I dig our hole a few yards away. When it is deep enough for both of us to crouch below the ground level, we take turns; an hour of looking into the dark, an hour to sleep, curled up in the bottom of the hole. My wrist watch has a bright luminous dial, so the man on watch uses it to time his hour. The two other ammo bearers are also paired in a hole to beef up the defensive position.

Occasional small arms fire crackles in the woods to our left. We knew the thump of our rifles, the crack of our carbines and the staccato bursts from our own machine guns and BARs. Now we recognize the German small arms; the sharp crack of their rifles and the roar of the "burp" gun which has such a high rate of fire that it makes a continuous sound rather than a series of individual shots.

All night the artillery duels over our heads. To our left front, flames light the sky; the village of St. Remy is burning in "no man's land." Behind us, German shells burst in the trees. We are hidden by the hill to our front; they cannot know where we are. We hope. Ten, sometimes twenty shells go out for each one that comes in. I wonder how the German troops must feel; they can count too.

At dawn we eat K-rations and send our bedrolls back to the jeeps. We continue standing watches so that we can get a little more sleep. About 11 a.m. the artillery begins a heavy barrage that lasts for an hour. We don light packs over our raincoats, and prepare to move out.

At noon, the riflemen move up the hill; a long line of skirmishers, spaced about 15 yards apart. They have fixed bayonets on their loaded rifles. Briefly silhouetted against the sky, they are a picture from the First World War. I almost expect to hear; "Over the top!" But the riflemen just say quietly; "Let's go." As they disappear over the hilltop, we pick up our guns and ammo boxes and follow.

At the crest of the hill, we set up our machine gun. I place the ammo boxes next to the gun, take a quick look around, and head back to the woods to bring up more ammo. Firing comes from a line of trees on the far side of a stream about a thousand yards away. The plowed field offers no cover; riflemen throw themselves into prone firing positions, fire a few shots, and run ahead to do it again.

The all night rain helps to reduce our number of casualties. German shells burst deep in the mud; when they explode, the shrapnel goes up instead of spreading a wide radius of destruction. Good thing they do not have our new proximity shells that burst some 20 feet above the ground!

As I leave, our machine guns open fire over our riflemen and into the German positions in the tree line. There is a sense of relief when I am behind the hill, but it only takes a few minutes to find the ammo jeep in the woods. Against my better judgment, I hurry back to the fight with three boxes of machine gun ammo.

From the crest of the hill, the bare field still slopes gently down to the stream and tree line. But now it is a battlefield, strangely quiet. Riflemen are crossing the stream while our machine gun rakes a woods on high ground to our left front. Casualties are walking or being carried back to jeeps behind us..

Captain Travis Hopkins, the Greyhounds' Commander, walks past me, his arm in a sling and his face contorted with pain.

Several riflemen are still on the ground. Nearby, their rifles stand, each with its fixed bayonet in the ground and a helmet on the rifle butt.

We pick up the guns and ammo, cross the field, wade through the stream, and climb up the next hill into a woods. Water in the stream is just an inch higher

than the top of my shoe-packs. We slosh, heavy-footed through the woods, set up the gun where there is a field of fire, and dump water from our boots. We dig slit trenches, deepen them into foxholes, and try to get a little rest - only to be pulled out of the woods in the middle of the night. Exhausted, we find ourselves moved into reserve positions; a secondary defense line set up behind the next row of hills. At least here we are not visible to the enemy.

41. RESERVES

When two battalions are "on the line," the third one may be in "reserve" behind the lines. The three regiments do the same thing; so there is a chance of being in battalion reserve 1/3 of the time; and in regimental reserve 1/3 of that time. This arithmetic says that we could be in some form of reserve say, 5 out of every 9 days or weeks; but events drain the reserves back into the lines at unexpected times, there are overlapping assignments, and sometimes, no reserves. From November 1, 1944 to May 1, 1945, we spent most of our days on the front.

For one day and night we are in a second line of defense, in reserve. Our gun sits in front of a shallow, covered pit; there is no indication of which way we are to face in this new forest location. We dig the hole a little deeper and wider and add dirt to the cover. Two of us can sleep while a third stands guard. One hour on and two off; what luxury!

My shoe packs and socks are off; feet are almost dry and the felt liners are drying - a little, - when the First Platoon Lieutenant calls me out of the hole to help free his jeep from a deep mud hole. Dry socks soak water out of the felts in my boots as I approach half a dozen men who are unable to move the jeep.

Ankle deep in mud, the men are being doused in muddy water from the jeep's four spinning wheels. Ignoring an order to join them, I carry firewood from a nearby pile. Several pieces under each wheel enable the jeep to climb out of the

mud hole without assistance. Back in our snug hole, we rest a few hours before moving to another "reserve" position.

Three of us are in a little dugout facing a road fork, so again we need to be on watch only one hour in three. We enjoy the quiet, knowing that we will become the main line of resistance (MLR), if the front line is overrun. Then the evening quiet is shattered by a series of nearby explosions.

A hundred yards to our left front, a 4.2 inch mortar crew is firing - and firing - at targets unseen. This irritates the Germans into lobbing 88 mm shells into the road fork area. We find ourselves hiding in our dugout from a barrage which is aimed at our neighbor - the mortar and its crew.

The 4.2 inch mortar is bigger and stouter than our 81 mm mortars. It is manned by Chemical Warfare troops but used mainly to fire white phosphorous ("Willy Peter") and high explosive shells. When dark falls, the mortar crew packs up and leaves in a couple of jeeps. Our road fork is quiet again, except for the sound of the rain and water flowing down the road, and distant small arms fire somewhere in the woods.

Years later a 4.2 inch mortar crewman writes (confirming Reeve's report): "We inadvertently fired a chemical weapon shell. To cover it up, we threw all the other ammo we had onto the same site. If the Germans had known, there would have been hell to pay."

The guard stands at the high end of our dugout behind the machine gun while an ammo bearer, and I sleep at his feet in the dugout. We wake to find water sloshing on and in our shoe packs; our feet are in water at the low end of the sloping hole. While I'm on guard, the other two go to a nearby stable where they can stay dry. Later, my turn comes to sleep in the stable, close to a board wall. Through spaces between the boards I can feel the warmth from a sleeping black cow. The hour on guard is easier when we know we can return to a dry warm place to rest.

I rejoin my second platoon as a second gunner, carrying the gun through the woods; following the first gunner with his unwieldy tripod. As dark falls, we dig slit trenches and then roll up in our bedrolls. Newly issued sleeping bags, lined with blankets, are better than blankets rolled in shelter halves. Still I cover my head to keep the cold air from chilling my lungs. This night we sleep with only one guard awake in the squad. Four consecutive hours of sleep!

Days and nights run together as we move from one place to another. One

night we sleep in a house while the snow falls outside. I hear a milk truck making pre-dawn rounds through the winter's first snow - at home in Baltimore?. Maybe school will be closed today. The dream fades as I wake and recognize the sounds of jeeps and trucks splashing through the slush covered cobblestones of Baccarat.

My watch strap breaks. It is the only luminous dial watch in the squad so it is used by each guard; passed from wrist to wrist at one hour intervals, every night for two weeks until the strap wore through. Now I carry it in the watch pocket of my OD trousers.

The respite is brief; we hike out of town and back into the woods while the snow turns to rain. Again, we sleep by our slit trenches in the woods.

The platoon is roused in the dark before dawn; "SADDLE UP; - C'MON! LE'S GO !" Snow covered packs are frozen stiff; numb fingers can hardly move the rigid straps to secure the bedroll. We pause to eat a cold "C" ration; one can of stew or hash; another can with biscuits and a packet of coffee or lemonade powder.

All night there has been sporadic firing of small arms and artillery in the distance. For a little while now all is quiet. We hike along a smooth black macadam road, winding along through the forest, up into the Vosges foothills. The pine trees look like ghosts on both sides of the roads; shrouded in mist and fog.

Once again I marvel at the clear forest floor. For centuries, nearby people gleaned twigs, brush, and fallen branches for fire wood. The Germans have cut off coal supplies, and the traditional gleaning of the forest has become very intensive. Earlier, we saw women and children carrying loads of faggots back to the villages. Now, where we are, the population has left the forest to the tender mercies of our heavy guns.

To the right, down the hillside we see an open field surrounded by tall pine trees; a large cemetery with rows of uniform little white crosses. The wide iron gates are topped by a wrought iron arch with iron letters: "American Expeditionary Forces Cemetery 1918." We feel a chill that is more than cold weather as a battery of 155's fires from behind us.

We move into the hills towards the exploding shells. Soon the shell fire is much closer than the guns.

It is Armistice Day, November 11, 1944.

42. ATTACK AT RAON L'ETAPE

The rain stops and starts, and the cold mist penetrates our clothes. Snow flakes are added to the mix. We move and dig in; hike some more, and dig in again. The evening of November 14 finds us digging reserve positions - yet again.

After dark, a jeep brings us a hot meal. And fruit cocktail! I am so hungry! Cook pours a pint of the sweet fruit mixture into my canteen cup and I gulp it down.

At dawn, the artillery is closer and louder; big guns are at it again. We move through a narrow valley; and approach closer and closer to the impact area where shells from the big 155 and 240 millimeter guns are bursting in trees and digging holes in the forest floor.

Shells burst in the trees up the hill, in plain view to our left. Suddenly I have to leave the column; I move into the woods to our right, dig a hole behind a tree and experience a severe attack of diarrhea. The discomfort sets me wondering; the living conditions are terrible, the water and food are suspect; I don't need a case of dysentery now; or maybe it is caused by fear? Those big shells are really stirring up a ruckus nearby. Moving so close to the bursting shells is terrifying. But the discomfort passes quickly and I recall the big canteen cup full of fruit cocktail. The same thing happened to me at home when I ate a whole can of that stuff.

Our squad joins a rifle company; we are hugging the ground and hiding behind trees. Ahead we see riflemen from another battalion in their foxholes; they are staying low; watching and firing. Beyond them I see a formidable stand of barbed wire stretched in a pattern from 6 inches to waist high, it covers an area 8 to 10 feet wide and runs out of sight along the tree line to left and right.

Beyond the barbed wire is a stretch of meadow; then a black macadam two lane highway, and beyond that higher ground. At the tree line I see a long trench. This is a key barrier on the road to Strasbourg on the Rhine River; a gateway into Germany.

The big shells have been bursting near the trench; now they are hitting farther back up the hill in the woods. The poor trees take a beating. Abruptly we move out. I carry the machine gun as we pick our way through a gap in the barbed wire. Later I learn that our platoon runner, Corporal Roy Kaminske was wounded while cutting that opening in the wire. He earns a Purple Heart and a Silver Star.

Just beyond the wire a dead American rifleman lies face down. He seems to be sleeping, very still. His GI shoes and leggings suggest that he is not from our Division (since we are wearing shoe packs).

We run across the field, over the road and up the hill beyond. A short jump and I'm over the trench; but lying in it is a young wounded German soldier; his gaunt face is pale and drained, his blue eyes plead for help but there is no stopping. Poor guy, he was defending his homeland; this is Alsace-Lorraine, most of the people here speak German, and the Germans have claimed this land with varying success for centuries. He was defending the land they had "recaptured" in 1940.

We follow the riflemen's charge on into the woods, over the hill and halfway down the other side. The trees are a solid cover above, but there is no underbrush. Walking, we can see only a few trees ahead but we can be seen from a long way off by anyone in a foxhole or trench at ground level. To our left the riflemen begin to fire. Just as we get our gun set up, the firing stops when the riflemen recognize they are firing on one of our own units.

Riflemen on both sides of us form our MLR ("Main Line of Resistance") and we prepare for an expected counterattack. The first gunner and I set our gun up on the edge of a shell hole which reeks of cordite explosive as we dig deeper to make a foxhole.

The Germans counterattack briefly on our left. We see distant figures flitting through the woods but they vanish before we can identify them. A volley of small arms fire from our left stops the attack.

We eat a K-ration and I store the tropical chocolate candy bar in my pack to help make the night's guard duty pass; a piece every fifteen minutes makes an hour go a little easier. We continue to dig.

Our hole is nearly waist deep when a German 88 mm gun fires from our front; the shell bursts high in a tree, perhaps a 100 yards to our right, a little to our rear and well behind the riflemen's positions. The next shell hits some 20 yards

closer to us; the Germans have not guessed where we are - yet.

The next shell burst is closer again; and then closer yet again. I tell the first gunner that the next one will be very close; we duck down into the hole at the sound of the shell approaching.

As the shells get closer, there is less warning sound, so there is almost no warning whistle when the explosion in the tree above lights up the dirt in the bottom of our hole. We duck, crouching as low as we can.

My right knee feels like I might have hit it on a stone in the bottom of the foxhole, but there is a small rip in my trouser leg; on the inside and above the knee. I pull the trouser leg out of the shoe pack and see another small hole in the trouser leg near the boot top. Pulling up the trouser leg reveals two ugly wounds; one above and one below the knee on the inside of my right leg.

As I crouched in the bottom of the hole, the muscles above and below the knee were bunched up; a small shell fragment missed my head and shoulders; penetrated the trouser, laid open the two wounds; exited again through the lower part of the trouser and then buried itself in the dirt beneath us.

The first gunner calls a medic; I climb out of the hole, sit on the ground and open my aid packet. Never saw the inside of one before. Since we each carry one, someone must be expecting us to get hurt.

The medic applies my aid packet bandage and another from his kit; one to each wound. I walk back up the hill, back across the now empty German trench. A jeep is carrying a wounded man on a litter and several more on the seats. The driver seats me on the hood; my feet on the bumper and a red cross flag in my hands.

We cross the nice smooth road and turn down a rough path; then bounce onto a narrow dirt road to a temporary aid station nestled in a curve in the road, sheltered by the hillside and the big trees. I watch a Chaplain heating adhesive tape over a little gasoline burner (usually used to heat rations) while I pry my fingers loose from the red cross flagpole. My hands are black and stiff; the cold is bone deep.

The ambulance heater warms us; I sit crowded on a litter with others who can still sit up. We look at three racks of litters, each carrying a man who cannot sit up. Another loaded rack hangs close above our heads. The ambulance jounces on shell-pocked roads and our wounds respond with new pains. I am not aware that the ambulance also carries our third squad gunners, Andy Aisenbrey and Jim

Curley.

Years later I learn that Andy is wounded in his left wrist, left foot, right hip and both buttocks; - and Jim has shrapnel in both legs and in his chin. That same day, Shrapnel splits open the helmet of Don Galles, leaving him stunned, but not hurt.

43. THE SHOWER

We are delivered to a temporary field hospital, set in tents, with operating rooms in a nearby house and barn. My trousers are cut away; the wounds are treated with sulfa powder and redressed. Snug in new pajamas and a warm cot, I ask, too late, if someone can find my watch. Next day another ambulance carries me to a "hospital."

I am in an Epinal schoolroom on the second floor. By the head of my bed, to the right, is the entry door and an aisle; then a line of beds alternating head and foot to the wall and the aisle.

Across the aisle to my right, only 4 feet away and pointing at me, is the bandaged stump of a leg, suspended by a pulley. I sit up, and look over the stump. The owner's face is lean and dark; I tell him my name, he says: "I am Margarito Comancho from New Mexico." I ask, "What happened to you?"

"We were patrolling a mile behind their lines; then all I remember is the explosion; they told me I stepped on a mine and walked out, the whole mile. I did not know my foot was gone."

Wearing pajamas and a light cotton robe, I limp down a flight of steps, and cross the open cobblestone school yard through a light snow to the school's unheated latrine. Cold wind sweeps through substantial gaps above and below the doors. The tile floor is lined with holes at regular intervals. Raised tiles on each side of each hole are obviously to keep one's feet off the wet floor. It is no place to tarry, and I hurry back up the steps to my warm bed. It is the first "old European" toilet that I have ever seen.

We are fed the "B" ration; canned stew or hash; dry, hard biscuit-crackers; powdered eggs and oatmeal with powdered milk for breakfast. I hope the first gunner finds the candy bar in my pack. I cannot get enough to eat. An hour after "chow" I am famished.

A medic takes me to a shower and tells me not to worry about the bandages; they are to be removed soon. The hot water sluices dirt from my blackened skin and turns muddy when I lather my hair. My hands begin to show white skin again. It is my first freshwater shower since we left New Jersey, 6 weeks ago.

Salt water showers on the troopship left a sticky salty residue; I can feel it washing away; the final cleansing after the layers of grime are gone. This shower is one I will never forget. For the rest of my life, every shower will remind me of this one.

The wounds are closed with stitches in a routine operation. When I wake from the anesthetic, I hobble back down the steps to the latrine. The next day the dressings are changed; the stitches did not hold. I am again on the operating table. This time the wounds are closed with skin grafted from the front of my right leg just above the knee.

The ward radio is playing Strauss Waltzes as I drift back to consciousness from the sodium Pentothal anesthetic. I seem to be floating; there is no pain; no weariness; no care or worry. Heaven must be so sweet.

A few hours later the anesthetic wears off and now I have three sets of bandages; three sources of pain, But I remember those waltzes.

This time I am restricted to bed for several days. Finally the bedpan routine is replaced by a pair of crutches which allow me to walk, to climb down the steps and back, to visit the latrine and mess hall, without using my right leg.

Snow drifts into the picturesque streets of Epinal, and I wonder at the fate of Company M - somewhere in the cold forests of the Vosges Mountains.

While I hobble about on crutches, Company M continues the drive to the Rhine and Strasbourg. About November 20, Company M is hit hard. Unknown to me, Don Galles, whose helmet was split open on November 15, is not so lucky this time. Shrapnel breaks his left femur, and he is carried to safety by Lt. Scott Witt. Our friend Bob Howell is killed.

We listen to the Armed Forces Network and the British Broadcasting Company. At every hour, the BBC broadcasts the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony: da-da-da- boom. Dot-dot-dot-dash; Morse code for "V" for Victory!

I am so Hungry! Again I think of the chocolate bar in my pack; no doubt the first gunner found it. He needs it worse than I do. I beg, and the mess attendant gives me a box of hard wheat crackers. I get extra rations; more dehydrated eggs, oatmeal, bread and stew. I eat ravenously for three days, and finally am sated.

After a week, the eating binge and restricted movement kills my appetite and I am not hungry for the really big Thanksgiving feast that the hospital lays out.

The hospital staff has accumulated a record number of days overseas. They landed in Central Africa before the African invasion and traveled overland to join our troops in Algeria. They followed along, picking up, and patching the pieces of men, - through Africa, Sicily, Italy, and Southern France to this little school house in the Vosges foothill town of Epinal. How could they work so hard, after all these years?

These nurses and doctors have been overseas 3 years already!

To my left, a few feet from my bed, a rifleman is using a wire coat hanger to scratch his leg inside a large cast. Disturbed by his moaning, I finally drift off to sleep. The next morning he is gone. A nurse says 'He died and was taken out while you slept.'

Strasbourg is captured and a patient from a German hospital is moved into the empty bed. Since he is a prisoner of war, we are ordered not to talk with him. His name is Carl Haase and he speaks some English. I ask him to teach me a little German. He says: "Why do you want to learn German, you are going back into the sea!" But he says it without much conviction.

I learn that he is an organist from Strasbourg; his wife and children have been evacuated into the Black Forest because of the fighting near their home, and he is worried, for the air raids are heavy on all the roads. I learn; "Ein, Swei, Drei" and a lot more.

We are listening to the first Glenn Miller broadcast from Paris. They introduce Glenn's newest tune: "Little Brown Jug." It is really great, the ward is fairly jumping. But Glenn Miller is missing.

Years later I read of a bomber crew's debriefing. When they jettisoned bombs over the British Channel, a tail gunner saw a bomb hit a small plane heading for France, - on the same day tht Glenn Miller's small plane vanished. The debriefing was classified and tucked away in closed files for years.

My wounds heal quickly as I walk and exercise. I wonder if the Doctors are delaying my release until after Christmas. There is an old piano in the mess hall; we gather and sing carols and dream of home. Christmas dinner is another feast of turkey and "fixings" and several kinds of pies.

I meet a studious, pudgy young PFC from another division and wonder at the fates that took him away from his campus. He shows me a slug from a German sniper's rifle. It is smaller in diameter and longer than our 30 caliber rifle bullets. The slug hit him in the chest and followed a rib around to his backbone. It was given to him by the surgeon who had removed it very carefully to avoid damaging the spinal column.

A supply clerk gives me a clean uniform and new size 9 combat boots. Very good! Since I wear an 8, there is room for two pairs of socks. Combat boots support the feet and ankles better than shoe packs. Walking and standing is easier.

I find a German utensil; a folding combination fork and spoon, and carry it tucked in a boot top for the rest of the war.

New Year's Day finds me on KP in a Replacement Depot ("Repple Depple") in Saarebourg. While scrubbing a sooty pot, I get a black smear on my shirt. A cook assigns me to wait tables in the Officer's Mess. Relief comes quickly when the dirty shirt offends the mess sergeant. I'd rather wash pots than wait on officers. In the back of the kitchen we mutter to each other; "Where do they get this shit; treating those guys like kings while we live in foxholes - and scrub pots."

I think back over the stay in the hospital; the fellow who died, the stump of a leg pointing at me for days and nights; the nurses; American women; overworked surgeons; the sniper's slug, - Thanksgiving turkey and Christmas carols - and the shower. Oh the shower!

Armed with a new a rifle and cartridge belt from the Repple Depple, I stroll up a cobblestone street in beautiful Saarebourg to find Division HQ.

Beyond the old houses lie silent wooded hills; the beautiful Vosges Mountains. Fields are covered with snow; the hardwood trees are skeletons; black against the white snow; interrupted seemingly at random by stands of green pine.