

## AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

### 44. BAD NEWS

At the town square, I am astonished to see the Division Band standing to the evening Retreat Ceremony. The Star Spangled Banner never sounded so good.

Standing at "Present Arms," I look past my rifle barrel and marvel at the contrast of the gray town, the distant wooded hills and the smartly dressed bandsmen. Their blue division patches, polished boots and white scarfs boast of the power of our Division; our Army; our Nation. It seems an extravagant way to wage a war; but the bandsmen double as a HQ security force.

A trumpeter looks familiar. As the band scatters, I fall in beside him; Walter Jones from the Citadel! He invites me to his room for a glass of wine, and later, dinner with the band. As we leave the mess hall, we meet young Lieutenant Eubanks; recently a PFC in Mike Company's first platoon.

We greet like old friends in a strange place. He sports a new mustache, a clean uniform, and a bright new gold bar on his collar. He looks ten years older. We avoid the awkward salute and I congratulate him on his new commission. He has just completed a crash indoctrination for new officers.

I ask about our mutual friend Bob Howell. Eubanks says; "You didn't hear about it? A shell tore up his leg. I was with him, and we got him back to the medics pretty quick; he was in good spirits, and getting good treatment. They said he ought to make it. But a few hours later, he died. I really can't understand it." The New Lieutenant is shaken by the telling and I do not press.

I ask about the commission. "It may get to be more dangerous than being a machine gunner, but it got me off the lines for a couple of weeks, and maybe I'll get a lucky assignment." I often wonder what happened to him.

Later I learn that Howell was killed when an 88 mm shell hit in his dugout while the first platoon was being run over by a German assault. They stayed with their guns while casualties piled up like cordwood in front of their positions. It is one of the few such instances in the story of our company. The Germans are usually more careful of their resources.

## 45. ATTACK ON LEMBERG

While I loafed in the hospital, the Third Battalion ran into a hornets' nest. Again Ralph Reeves reports:

"The mortar platoon's first section became more of a communication section, as several of us strung wires or carried radios for the forward observers. I carried the radio for Sgt. Tim Timmerman who was forward observer for the day.

We took off early with L Company on a high contour of some kind of hill, and promptly received all kinds of shell fire. A tree burst sent shrapnel through Tim's helmet and wounded the top of his head."

"He took off to the rear (and rejoined us a few weeks later), but there I was wondering, 'For Christ's sake, what do I do now?' I mused that it was only my job to carry the radio for the sergeant, but he was gone. I wasn't hit, so it seemed absolutely chicken to leave, so I figured, 'Oh well, I will take his place the best I can, and stay with the riflemen.'"

"A few moments later I found out what an 'ashen' expression meant. Several of us were in a little group, including Lt. Ashbrook (who later was killed) and the L Company Commander (Captain Alphonso?), and also a medic named George Demopoulos who really looked very visibly upset like I had never witnessed before. George had just patched up some guys, and had amputated a hand, and that really got to him."

"We were pinned down just below the crest of the hill by a pair of 20 mm guns using explosive shells. For the 20 mm guys, we were sitting ducks and pretty soon we advanced across a small clear space and were at a two story farm house about 50 feet from a railroad embankment, and maybe twice that far from a railroad underpass. We got no farther that day or night. Everything was near suicide from the tracks and beyond to the first few buildings of the town."

"That farm house cellar was the L Company CP for the night. There must have been ten of us, including say, four wounded. The roof and second floor got all shot up with mortars. No one slept, and in the middle of the night we got word that some L Co. guys were captured on the other side of the tracks."

"The Germans damn sure didn't want us in that town. That night a guy died who had been brain shot earlier at the tracks. Luckily, some other unit attacked about dawn straight up the Lemberg Highway (I understand) and the Germans took

off in our neighborhood. The L Co. radio man and radio had been hit too, so one of the officers borrowed mine and I hot footed it back to my platoon, sans sergeant and sans radio."

"Sometime later Sgt. Timmerman returned, after recovery from his head wound. We were sharing a cozy little dugout just off the road to Lembach from Reyersweiller."

"Four mortars were set up in positions we occupied off and on for weeks. We did a lot of shooting into Reyersweiller and surrounding woods, mostly at night. Snow was thick all around but our dugout was cozy. It had a sort of "L" shaped entry tunnel which we covered with shelter halves and blankets so no light could escape."

"We had all the comforts of home meaning a telephone to platoon CP and a light. When a battery was too pooped out for the radio phones there still was plenty of juice to light a flashlight bulb. So I wired a bulb to a dead battery and voila! There was light!"

"Tim answered the phone one evening and in a little bit he burst into uncontrolled laughter like he had heard the funniest joke ever. Later he explained that he had been offered a commission as second lieutenant."

"I figured, 'Hmm, that's not so funny. Seemed like an honor (he was a buck sgt. transferred from some outfit that had buck sergeants). Tim went on to say that lieutenants were wanted for rifle platoons and he wanted no part of that. That made sense."

" Several weeks later I get a call from Sgt. Roman, our platoon sergeant. 'Reeves, do you want to be a lieutenant?' I said 'Thanks for the flattery, sergeant, but no thanks.' No peals of laughter from me and I felt a little regretful, but the experience with Tim rang in my ears. I figured too they must have run through a lot of guys before they asked me. So I was still a PFC when I left the Army after my five months in the hospital."

Ralph Reeves

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## 46. THE ESCAPE

By the end of December, unknown to us, the 398th Regiment is moved north towards the Bulge and the 399th is left to cover the entire 100th Division front with only some 1,500 men.

After the Germans were turned back in the Battle of the Bulge, they turned their attention and considerable forces to a back-up plan known as "Operation Northwind." To spearhead this drive, breakouts were attempted through the thin line held by the 100th Division and through the gap between the Seventh American Army and the French to the South.

A few days before and after New Year's Day, the thin lines of the 399th are hit by a large German force; some 20,000 men, several hundred tanks and a group of flak wagons. They attempt to break through our lines and recoup their losses at Bastogne.

Sergeant Roland Tuttle writes:

"I began New Year's Day with a 'BANG!' We were in a dugout when a German officer shot three of us. I was shot through my right ankle (FCC Ascalsis). It shattered the ball and socket joint taking parts of the heel and ankle bones as the bullet splintered, entering the calf of my leg in five places."

"We left the machine guns. As we left the hole, Reyersweiller was down below. I read that there were 65 of us, but I can't imagine there being so many there. I left on the back of PFC Frank L. Willis, as he trudged through the snow back to Siersthal. We were challenged as we came to the building where Willis dumped my carcass, for which I am ever grateful. Never could have made it out alone."

"Lt. Peebles tells me that I begged to stay with the platoon. Realizing, after

the ambulance ride back to Miracourt, the agony I suffered from that ride, the shock and trauma told me that I would not be chasing any Krauts after that."

Roland Tuttle

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All day long a rifle company and the Company M Second Platoon listened to German troops moving around them. They could see artillery pieces being moved on their right flank. They were surrounded. That night the order came to evacuate the positions on foot; the heavy machine guns must be left in place with their bolts removed.

The column moved quietly through the snow, barely illuminated by the starlight. Suddenly the lead scout returned to report sighting a German sentry. He was sure they had been seen. The men hugged the ground, shivering in the snow and expecting small arms, mortar or artillery fire.

Scouts advanced stealthily until they could watch the foolhardy sentry who seemed to be standing still in the middle of a clearing. They crept closer, expecting to trigger a booby trap or to be challenged, but nothing happened. Suddenly a distant flare brought enough light for them to recognize that the sentry was a 6 foot high concrete shrine housing a stone cross.

Breathing easier, the column filed past the shrine. No one laughed until they were safely back behind our new lines near the village of Siersthal.

Staff Sgt. John Aughey reports that the first platoon was less fortunate. New Lieutenant John Langley is with the first platoon when their positions are overrun by the German offense. Aughey, as section leader, ordered Pfc.'s Oscar Peck and Don Shaffer to move back with the retreating riflemen. Then Aughey moved to the other gun and retreated with them back to Siersthal. Peck and Shaffer did not show up and were later found to have been captured.

(Fifty years later Shaffer stops in Madison, Alabama to get a copy of the first edition of this book. He cannot remember what company he was in, but knew it was the 399th Regiment. Later, John Aughey told me about the capture, and Shaffer was reunited with his old section leader.)

Shaffer reports: "We were to go out with the riflemen, but they did not leave. We had a two-man hole behind the gun, and a larger hole in back where we could sleep. We were doing two men, two hours on the gun, and then two men,

two hours sleeping back in the bigger hole. I had just come off guard and was sleeping pretty good when the Germans attacked.”

“Now I think I should have gone back up to the gun, but if I had, I would have been killed. We were cut off and being attacked by more Germans than I ever saw. I fired my pistol by sticking it up over the edge of the hole. Then I shot at a German rifleman who was running at my hole, just as he fired. We both missed, and he stopped with his rifle pointing at my head.. I gave him my pistol; it had two rounds left. He would have killed me, but an officer stopped him. They wanted some live prisoners.”

Four months later, when Shaffer is liberated by the Russians, his weight had fallen from 145 to 90 pounds.

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Ralph Reeves continues:

"A couple of weeks later I suffered my one wound of the psyche, vanity, or what have you. But first let me tell you about the burning of the Citadel of Bitche. Lt. Flaum and I were on forward outpost detail in another two story farm house with woods behind us and clear farm land ahead and between us and the Citadel. We had a perfect view of my first castle, and I thought it was beautiful. We could see into the town a bit too where school buildings stood to our left front."

"We were in the attic where we could peer out of a window or lift roof tiles to look out. All of a sudden the biggest damn bombs or shells we ever heard were exploding all around us and I just knew I would be dead in seconds. I had visions of railroad guns; heading for the cellar didn't make sense; too late, and if whatever it was hit the house, the cellar was no protection."

"It took only a few seconds to determine that a self propelled 155 mm cannon had pulled up behind the house and was busy shelling the Citadel of Bitche with white phosphorous to burn it down. It seemed a shame. We had no clue whether there were Germans inside, and word was that our guys were burning the place just in case. I often wondered if there were any 'for real' targets inside that place, and how much damage was done. It was spectacular, but certainly no thrill watching it happen. Those big shells must have cleared our attic by inches. It is for sure that being a few yards in front of big stuff like that is enormously loud and frightening when you don't know what is happening and figure you are being shot at."

"We were there several days and I was summoned back to the platoon CP. I

want to relate how gung ho, GI, wired tight I was as a soldier. Walking back, I wondered 'What did I do now? Did I goof or something? Why would Lt. Collins want to yak with me?' Turns out Sgt. Bruno Marino had been bitching on my behalf, saying I had too much outpost detail, and he had bitched to the Lt. to call me back. I was surprised and a bit mortified; I had done no bitching at all, myself. Lt. Collins said: 'Reeves, Sgt. Marino thinks you should be relieved and brought back. I'll do that, and put you in another section. What have you to say?'

"I was shocked numb and offended too, but wasn't lost for words very long. I stood straight as I could and said something to the effect: 'Sir, thank the sergeant for me (he was standing right there) but I am a soldier and I try to be a good soldier. It is not the job of a soldier to complain about his assignment and I have no complaints whatever. Also, given a choice, I would never ever transfer from first section to one of the other sections. 'If there is nothing more, Lieutenant, may I return to my outpost?' Back I went, and within a couple of hours I was to get a big chuckle out of all my gung ho talk. Word went around that we were to attack across the empty field in front of us the next morning - presumably to charge the Citadel or the town.

"I figured 'Oh boy, Reeves, now you have done it! Opened your big yap to the Lt. with all that good soldier stuff and tomorrow morning you meet your Maker for sure, crossing that 500 yards or more of open field of fire for the Germans.' I guess I wasn't really funny, but I did laugh at myself, calling myself Big Jaw and less polite names."

"Instead of attack, we pulled back and ended up on Spitzburg Hill, or some damn hill from which we retreated pell mell on New Year's Day morning with bursts of shell fire about a 100 yards away. We went to Glassenberg, a tiny village atop a ridge, where we spent much time off and on that winter."

"I mounted my mortar (none of that 'leave the gun behind' bullshit) behind a house in the middle of the village. From the back yard of that house, in pretty much of a straight level line was the top of Signalberg Hill and a signal tower of some kind. I could have mounted my mortar in the backyard and sighted directly at the tower, or anything around it, but I had been through that shit at St. Die."

"One bit of tomfoolery that went on from that yard was mortar sniping at a German soldier digging in on our side of the crest near the tower. I forget the range, but let's guess 800 yards or so. Minimum range for the mortar is 550 yards and that is at an 89 degree angle. I defy anyone to distinguish between 89 degrees

and straight up plumb, which I did on New Year's morning around 2:00 a.m. when we were said to be surrounded by the bad guys. When that tube is pointed at 89 degrees, you worry about the wind. There was none, but I was saying, 'Wind, don't blow now!' In soft ground, the base plate of the mortar might bury itself several inches after one round and this increases the angle of the tube."

"I would shoot one round at this German soldier digging on top of Signalberg, This dude's antics developed an audience on our side. The sound at the barrel got to the guy in a second or two and he knew he had half a minute before the shell came back to earth, possibly on his head, so when he heard the gun he would dig furiously for a few seconds and then jump into whatever he had dug. This went on for a half dozen rounds, and to this day, I do not know what happened to him. I don't think we got him. I hope not, he was a helluva man, digging and dodging out there where the whole American Army could watch. He deserved to live and play touch football with his kids someday. I think he got bored and wandered off over the hill - or maybe we ran out of ammo. The 550 yards was the real problem, for we soon hauled ass out of there and back to our old spots on Spitzberg from which we retreated but fast a few hours later."

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## 47. THE REUNION

A series of trucks carry me to the Company M HQ in the snow covered mountain village, Siersthal, France. Not too long ago it was known as Siersthal, Germany. The people speak German. The territorial conflict is ancient.

HQ for Company M is a crowded little farmhouse in the middle of town. Another soldier and myself are welcomed by the mail clerk and cooks, we are just in time for supper, and a letter is waiting for me. Later, we are sitting on the floor in the large front room when the Acting Company Commander, First Lt. Keeling, comes in and welcomes us back: "In the morning we are going to have a party and go after some high ground that we lost last week. Do you guys want to play too?"

Startled; I respond: "That's what they sent us back for, Sir." He fastens a map to the wall and shows us the positions: "We are here, and they are there. Tomorrow night we should be there and they should be gone."

The "party" looks risky to me. To the North and East of Siersthal I can see there is high ground overlooking the road to the German fortress at Bitche. The platoon leaders and platoon sergeants arrive and are briefed on the coming attack.



I leave with Lt. Witt and Sgt. Hogan; they are old friends who have survived on the front while I languished in the school hospital in Epinal. Now they look a lot more than 6 weeks older. Sgt. Revere, I hear, is back in the hospital again, this time with a minor ailment, after having been there several times with minor wounds. His guardian angel has been busy, and he is warm and dry - and safe!

The second platoon is billeted in a typical village house; the first floor is a stable; a huge manure pile occupies an open concrete enclosure in the front yard; the second and third floors are living areas.

We sleep on the hard wood floor. The latrine is an open block structure built around a hole in the ground next to the rear of the house. Not luxurious, not even comfortable, but we appreciate being warm and dry. I exchange my rifle, bayonet and cartridge belt for a gunner's pistol, trench knife, and pistol belt.

Tonight we take new belts of ammo and replace the tracers - every fourth round - with "ball" cartridges. Tracers show where your rounds are going; but they also show the enemy the exact location of your gun, as described by Reeves, earlier. I wonder what the supply sergeant does with all those tracers. More to the point; tomorrow I will be a gunner again, in another attack.

At midnight I am standing guard in front of the platoon house. The wind driven snow is decorating the village anew; even covering the steaming manure piles in front of each house. I hear the crunch of boots in the snow, and challenge an approaching soldier: It is John Langley; with new gold bars on his collar! We greet each other like the old friends that we are, and cuss each other affectionately. He wishes me luck and vanishes in the dark.

I spend the next hour wondering about all the things that have happened to him. And wishing that I could be counting the minutes on my own watch with its bright, friendly luminous dial face. The snow is already ankle deep, and still falling hard when my relief arrives.

Before dawn we wake, already partly dressed. By candlelight, we add layers of clothes for cold weather; "Long Johns," wool OD shirt and trousers (that we slept in) two pairs of socks; an OD sweater with a high snug collar; water resistant over trousers and field jacket, and a loose knit wool OD scarf. Under the helmet is a wool cap; the "beanie" with its little visor and a snug band that folds down and wraps the back of the neck and the ears. We look like big children in cruddy overstuffed snow suits.

We leave the light and warmth of the old stone farmhouse and join the rest of the second platoon in the snow covered street. The cold, predawn light reveals that my old friends have changed, and the ranks are sprinkled with new faces. Everywhere I see hollow sunken eyes, dark shadow beards, and a lethargy of fatigue from the continuous night watches.

There are a few parkas; in one I recognize Staff Sergeant Fitzgerald. Last summer he was a rotund first sergeant, now he looks like Mauldin's cartoon of GI. Joe; his normally heavy beard accents the hollowed eyes; his paunch is replaced by the bulge of his parka, gathered into his rifle belt which sags under the weight of a full canteen and full ammo pouches. He is again, lean and hard, but now he is also a veteran of two months of combat.

Old friends greet me. Sgt. Waller, always lean and supple, now seems cadaverous. His constant good humor has worn thin, but his Oklahoma accent persists. "Hancock, ain't yew got bettah sinse then tew cum beck heah?" The logic is inescapable, but I mimic him: "Hail no! Ah never been heah befoh and Ah jist figgered yew guys would need a lil' he'p this mawnin'!"