

LOVE COMPANY

BEYOND LEMBERG

13 Dec 44 Left Lemberg Fr 1500 by foot arr Schwangerbach Fr 1650 dist. marched 3 1/2 miles.

During the next week, the company was in reserve. We cleaned ourselves by bathing out of our helmets which served as wash basins. We also shaved a two week growth of whiskers with a dull army razor. I let my mustache grow just for a change. We scrubbed our clothes clean of the mud and filth. The supply sergeant gave each of us clean underwear and socks which came in one color: olive drab because white underwear was more visible to the enemy. Of course, we were seldom seen in our underwear.

We stripped, cleaned and oiled our weapons to be sure that they would be ready for us when we returned to the front. I remember being told that my rifle or BAR or carbine was my closest friend.

In the civilian houses where we were quartered, we had a chance to sleep in a real bed. It was not an Army cot or a bedroll, but a real bed with a mattress, sheets, and a down comforter. That was an indescribable luxury. Yet, strangely, I found it difficult to sleep in the bed because my body had become used to the hard, cold surface of the ground. I could drop to the ground almost anywhere and fall asleep instantly, feeling very comfortable.

The mail clerk had accumulated our letters from home and we had a little time to read about the world we left and were fighting to return to. We, in turn, wrote letters back home, in pencil, that our lieutenant had to read and censor. It was forbidden to give any information about where we were or what we did or what we might do. I did not feel that I could tell anything in a letter or even in person about what it was like to fight in a war as a dogface. What good would it have done, anyway? However, I did tell my younger brother who was seventeen in 1944 to join the Navy before he was drafted into the Army. That was not censored and he took my advice.

Meanwhile, laid out in contorted positions alongside one of the buildings in town were the bodies of about a dozen German soldiers. We passed them on our way to the chow line each day. Seeing the gray lifeless corpses with sightless eyes wide open and flies buzzing around them did

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not disturb most of the men who had seen almost two months of combat and death in many forms. Since it was late autumn and the weather was cold, the corpses did not smell of decay.

One or two of our soldiers had a morbid interest in the bodies, and they went through the pockets of their uniforms for anything of value. Family photos of wives and children and identification cards with a picture of the dead soldier were discarded by the body, along with letters and other personal belongings.

The most ghoulish acts were the amputating of a finger to get a gold wedding ring that would not slide off and the prying out of gold teeth with a bayonet. I did not see the actual deeds, but I noticed the corpse with a wedding ring on his finger one day and the following day the finger and the ring were gone. Sometime later, one of our soldiers was proudly showing everyone his "gold collection," which he kept in a glass jar. He had gold teeth, rings and other jewelry. We knew how he had collected them and most of us were disgusted with him.

Even if he was poor and had suffered through the "Great Depression," what was money or gold worth in a foxhole? No one cared about money. We had none. We did not get money on the front line. A private got less than \$3.00 a day in overseas combat infantry pay, plus nutritious food, adequate clothing and dig-your-own shelter. Our lives were put on the line by our country and we were fighting to keep them. Nothing else mattered more than that.

During this week, we also heard about the German Ardennes Offensive that became known as the "Battle of the Bulge." We were not involved directly in the battle, which was to the north of us on the Belgian and Luxembourg front. The situation there was very serious. Our part of the front in the South with the Seventh Army was of secondary importance. Support units, such as tank battalions, artillery batteries, and Army Air Corps units were relocated to the Ardennes sector where they were needed. As a result, there was a notable lack of new replacements in our company. Since we entered combat, at the beginning of November, the Morning Reports show that we had 18 privates and one T5 join the company as new replacements. Many came from other units where they were no longer needed, such as anti-aircraft artillery, and others came directly from the States right out of basic training. Nevertheless, there was a constant shortage of soldiers in our company.

I had a chance to look around at the whole company while we were in reserve. It was obvious that there were many men gone from the

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company and the ranks of non-coms were filled with the promotion of PFCs and privates. At the time I did not know how many were in the company but the Morning Report of that day listed five officers and 123 enlisted men.

A memorable soldier was T. Sgt. Argil H. Warner, who was a platoon sergeant and probably the oldest man in our company. He was about 36 years old and was affectionately called "Pop" Warner by "his boys" who were about half his age. His younger brother, who was in the First Infantry Division, had urged him to transfer out of the rifle company and get an assignment in a less dangerous unit. Because of his age he could have gotten another assignment but he replied that he would not leave his boys. It happened in the vicinity of Schwangerbach, France that he was killed in action by a direct artillery hit on his foxhole. He wanted to do his duty as a soldier even if it cost him his life. The Army does not give medals for devotion and loyalty to fellow soldiers above and beyond the call of duty.

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BITCHE, FRANCE

15 December 1944, we reached a wooded mountain facing the Citadel and the Maginot Line at the town of Bitché. (The French pronunciation is “Beesh,” but for several reasons the Americans called it a female dog.)

From the edge of the forest, we could look across an open field of some 500 yards toward huge concrete forts where the retreating German Army had taken up defensive positions. We had no idea what we were facing from our foxholes in the woods where we had dug in. We could see concrete bunkers that had a commanding view of the entire area before them. The fortifications here were the strongest of the entire Maginot Line. We did not know that. We only knew that this was the next objective. Looking at these gray, ominous forts did not make us feel very happy. We waited for orders to attack, but the enemy positions had to be softened up first.

The Story of the Century describes the situation, as follows:

“Now began 36 hours of air and artillery attack on the forts surrounding Bitché. Besides our organic artillery battalions, our division had five attached battalions: two of 105mm howitzers, two of 155mm howitzers and one of 4.5-inch guns, or 60 firing pieces. On call, in addition, were a battalion of 155mm rifles, a battalion of 8-inch howitzers, two batteries of 240mm howitzers, and one battery of 4.2-inch chemical mortars.”

(Later, self-propelled guns of the 781st and the 824th Tank Destroyer Battalions were moved up into firing position.)

Our artillery pounded the forts with a barrage of shells. We could see the shells land and, when the air cleared, the forts had chipped concrete but were still intact. The division artillery battalion with 155mm “Long Tom” cannons was brought up to the front so that they could fire directly – point blank – at the concrete monsters. They had direct hits, but it was the same as before. We could see some shells bounce off the rounded concrete bunkers and burst in the air.

Finally, some of the heaviest artillery in the Army was brought in, and that included the 240mm howitzer. After being pounded by 240mm howitzer shells seven Germans surrendered from inside the fort. They

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were driven out by the concussion and the noise, but the shelling did very little damage to the concrete forts.

Then 78 fighter/bombers were called in, and they dropped 27 tons of 500-pound bombs in a series of dive bombings in a futile attempt to neutralize and destroy their targets. After all this, the forts were still there: gray, silent, unmoved, looking benign, but deadly powerful.

We now knew that it was up to us to take those forts where the Germans were still hunkered down and waiting. For us, the expendable GIs, it was a matter of getting up to the open gun slits and the steel doors and fighting our way in to rout the enemy. The plan was to have us charge across the open field under covering machine gun and mortar fire with a smoke screen to reach the fortifications. At this point, each soldier was to carry out his own assignment. I had the task of carrying a satchel or "bee-hive" charge, which was a 25-pound cone-shaped charge of TNT designed to cling to a vertical or horizontal surface. This had to be strategically placed by hand, and the fuse had to be ignited. Before it exploded, I would have enough time to find a cozy spot to wait in safety.

This whole idea seemed ludicrous to me after seeing what little damage had been done before by huge pieces of Army ordnance. However, I was assured that this little device was shaped to explode with such tremendous, concentrated force that it would blow a hole in any spot. Through the opening, we could then drop lots of grenades on the defenders. Still, to me, the idea of running across that open field of fire, carrying this clumsy bomb, climbing up to a huge bunker, and setting it off seemed to be the height of absurdity. However, I knew I would try to do it. On other missions, I had known fear but I had not lost courage or determination. This time I had a mortal fear that it would be my last mission.

The other men in the platoon had their assignments. One of them, Al Lapa, had to carry a flame-thrower across the open field and try to get up to an opening in the bunker. Then he had to shoot his fiery stream inside at the enemy. He told me, "They must be crazy if they think I'm going to run at the Krauts with 10 gallons of gasoline on my back! It weighs 75 pounds and when I hit the ground the thing knocks off my helmet and slides off my back." When he complained to Lt. Taylor, someone else got the assignment.

These Maginot Line forts were so solidly built that they could only be taken attacking the enemy from the inside. Everyone was prepared to make the assault on the fort in front of us. It had to be knocked out. On an-

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other bunker, other units of the division were able to blast in through the steel doors to rout the German defenders in their sector.

“These were the forts about which Ed Clark, staff writer for *Stars and Stripes*, describing the Maginot Line, had said that the fortifications were ‘stacked up gravel’ and could be ‘reduced to powder with a pencil.’ Having read these statements, a number of the men who had attacked the forts in the Maginot Line around Bitche, sent Clark a box of pencils and wrote him saying he could have the job. Later Clark visited the area and wrote a retraction.”
(*Story of the Century*, page 92)

This situation convinced me that bombing and strafing and artillery shells alone cannot win battles and in turn cannot win wars. Even 70-ton tanks cannot do it alone. It is the little soldiers in the front line who must be there to claim the victory or suffer the defeat. All the other units have to support them so that they can take possession of the enemy’s territory and defeat his forces.

Before we had to launch our attack, the situation was changed by the battle to our north.

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PULLBACK

Our assault on Bitche was aborted because of the Battle of the Bulge, which began on 16 December 1944. That attack was so overwhelming that it drew on all the Allied military resources to repulse it. We could not continue our advance on the Seventh Army front without adequate artillery and tank support. Furthermore, it was learned that the German Army was preparing an attack on our front.

In the foxholes, we only knew that we were moving back and that the supply sergeant was issuing gas masks to everyone. "The Germans are going to use poison gas to stop the Americans!" was the word on the front. Would it be mustard gas, or lewisite, or phosgene? Who could remember what those deadly gasses smelled like back in basic training? After a few days, the gas masks were returned to the supply sergeant and we did not have to worry about a poison gas attack. Maybe the enemy did not intend to use gas because we had chemical mortars ready to fire back tons of poison gases. Or, perhaps, our Army "Intelligence" just had its periodic lapse.

21 Dec 44 Left Schwangerbach Fr. 1815 by foot arr Lambach Fr 2045 distance marched 4 miles.

It was time to return to the front line and relieve King Company. 1815 hours is late in the evening to start a march, and in winter, in the snow-covered mountains where there is no light but the moon and the stars, the world is shades of gray. In the lowly ranks of the privates and the PFCs where information is seldom given, no one had any idea of where we were or where we were going. In order not to get lost, we followed closely behind the soldier in front of us, and no one could talk or light a match or cigarette. It was single file through woods, across roads and open fields, and at one point we slid down the bank of a stream on the seats of our pants and waded across to the other side. There the riverbank was muddy, and we slipped trying to get up it. The man behind had to boost up the man in front of him. Most of the time each soldier had to hold onto the belt of the man in front of him because it was pitch black. We were lost!

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Somehow, we finally arrived at the town of Lambach and spent the night in the schoolhouse. It was 2045. We had gone 4 miles in 2½ hours! We never found K Company but it was rumored that we had gone behind the German line and circled back to our own. It seemed that map reading was not a strong point with some of our officers.

The following morning, the battalion commander, Major Angelo Pinero, arrived at the schoolhouse in a state of barely controlled rage. In his high-pitched voice, he reamed out our company commander, Capt. Carl Alfonso, for getting us lost. We were grateful that we were still alive.

We still had to relieve K Company and headed off in daylight to find them. We came across a distant spot on the side of a hill that looked like an outpost in front of a wooded area. Lt. Taylor halted the platoon in the woods where we were and ordered another GI and me to go and check the outpost for K Company. We slowly plodded up the snow-covered hill with our heavy winter clothing, our clumsy shoe-pac boots, our rifle, and ammunition, slipping every few steps. We were about 200 yards from the outpost and still could not tell if we were looking at friends or enemies. Then we saw two helmeted heads rise slowly and two rifles appear over the edge of the foxhole. They were pointed at us! Uh-oh! In an instant, we both spun around and raced back down the hill as bullets flew at us. We fell. We rolled. We got up. We zigzagged and got back gasping to our line.

Before we moved on, a 60mm mortar crew from our heavy weapons platoon was called in to return fire to that outpost. As we watched, they sent up three or four shells that landed directly on the enemy dugout. The accuracy of our mortarmen amazed us. That finished their outpost.

We finally found K Company and took over their foxholes so that they could get relief and rest for a few days. During those times when we passed through another company hardly more than a few words were ever exchanged. It seems as though one company had gotten a reprieve and the other company had been returned to serve its time. Between the two groups, there were only feelings of common understanding of what we all experienced.

24 Dec 44 Left Lambach Fr 1400 by motor arr Goetzenbruck Fr 1445 distance motored 8 1/2 mi.

Christmas 1944 was spent in a foxhole. We had to dig through snow and a foot of frozen ground before we reached softer earth. Then the foxhole was made about 6 feet by 6 feet and 4 feet deep. Branches of pine

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trees were cut to line the dirt floor, and heavier branches were cut to cover half of the opening of the hole. This made a cozy place that gave protection and warmth.

We had a special hot turkey dinner on Christmas Day, which was received on a chow line about 100 yards behind the front line. The extra treat was a can of beer and some peanuts, and the special present was a fur-lined parka overcoat. The fur was on the inside and the rough skin was on the outside. The fur coat had a reversible cloth covering in white on one side and khaki on the other. With the attached hood, we were warm inside that coat like never before. These bulky outfits made everybody look very wide, but underneath each one there was just some skinny kid.

There were religious services also that were held in the open field just beyond the chow line. It was relatively quiet that day. Some cannon fire was heard now and then, but it was very little. What a paradox it was to be eating out in the snow with grubby, grimy hands, sitting on a log, enjoying turkey, mashed potatoes with gravy and a hot cup of coffee and saying "Merry Christmas." The religious services were brief and led by a chaplain who seldom ventured to the front on any other occasion. Nevertheless, Christmas carols were sung with clouds of vaporous breath, and it almost seemed festive. When it was over, we picked up our weapons and shuffled back to our foxholes.

We remembered how it was often said that the war would be over by Christmas. There was a popular song everyone sang, "I'll be Home for Christmas." We were not home and there was a lot more war to be fought before it was over.

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LEMBERG, FRANCE – ON DEFENSE

*26 Dec 44 left Goetzenbruck Fr by truck at 1500 arr at Lemberg
Fr 1540 dist. motored 1 7/8 mi.*

For the first time since we entered the line, we had to take up defensive positions. We no longer were chasing the Germans. We were going to dig in and wait for them to attack us, but that still meant that we had to send out reconnaissance patrols. We needed to learn where they were, what they had, and what they were doing. In the meantime, we cleaned and checked our weapons. Every man was given extra ammunition and grenades. Machine guns were brought up to the foxholes with many boxes of ammunition. Fifty caliber machine guns, which are usually mounted on vehicles such as a tank, a half-track or a truck, were brought to the front line positions with ample belts of ammunition. We were well armed to defend our line.

The main deficiency in L Company was the lack of men. We had between 125 and 130 enlisted men and six officers. Of the original number of 141 privates and PFCs, there were only about 94 at the end of December 1944. Sergeants were always replaced by privates or PFCs, so that there was always a full complement of noncoms. I was asked to be the leader of my squad at this time. To be a sergeant was not one of my burning ambitions, and I demurred. However, when I was told that it would be either me or another soldier whom I did not think was experienced, I accepted. Thus, I was an acting sergeant and my 12-man squad consisted of one soldier, Pvt. Junior P. Ogle. We were not a formidable force, but we were ready.

Losses of privates and PFCs were filled by replacements, and we had very few of them for many weeks. Nevertheless, we had the responsibility of defending a very wide stretch of the front. Foxholes were manned by two men, not three, and they were spaced about 100 feet apart. Each hole was placed to cover an open field of fire from a ridge that was to the left of the railroad tracks. We had never had such a large front to defend. If just one foxhole was penetrated, there was enough room to send an enemy company through. The gaps between us were more than we had ever had before, and we had nobody behind us in reserve in case we could not hold the line.

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Forward outposts were about 50 yards in front of this main line of defense. One was to the left in an open area, and the other was to the right of the railroad tracks. Each outpost was manned by two of our men. At the left outpost were Pfc. Paul (Abe) Lincoln and Pfc. Maurice (Mo) Lloyd who had been seriously wounded on 16 November 1944. The medics healed him and he returned to the company on 11 December 1944. At the right outpost were Pfc. Alexander (Skull) Lapa and Pfc. Ernest (Ernie) Weinberger.

For a couple of days, we had nothing to do but prepare and wait. We were not sure when and if the Germans were going to attack. We thought that this was a time to rest while the Battle of the Bulge was being waged in the North. One day, feeling lonely, Lapa strolled in from his outpost wearing a German helmet that he had found – just another day of laughs in the life of an infantryman. Fortunately, he was recognized as our crazy old buddy who always seemed to have trouble staying put in one place.

We did not have anything to drink to celebrate the coming New Year. Alcohol was never issued to the men in our infantry unit. However, for this New Year's Eve, I believe one bottle of beer was given to each of us. French soldiers filled their canteens with wine and German soldiers filled theirs with schnapps, but American infantrymen had Halozone tablets to purify the water in our canteens that we sometimes filled from nearby streams. On the chow line, there often was a Lister bag of water, which was a cloth-covered rubberized sack with a spigot that dispensed chlorinated water that tasted and smelled like it came out of a swimming pool. We had to dissolve powdered coffee, lemonade or bouillon soup to make it palliative. Such was the extent of our New Year's Eve celebration.

Late in the evening of December 31, 1944, a lot of activity on the German side of the front was noticed by our men in the forward outposts. We were not at all sleepy because we had been expecting some kind of attack, but we did not know how big it would be. Strangely, no one seemed to be nervous or panicky. There was just a tense calm along our line as we waited in the icy cold, exhaling clouds of vaporized breath and moving feet and hands to keep warm. The moon was bright and the snow reflected the light that gave an eerie grayness across the land.

It was during early hours of New Year's Eve when the Germans launched their attack on the Seventh Army front. Hitler called it "Operation Nordwind." At the onset of the attack, our forward outposts were hit hard by the Germans. Lapa fired the three rounds from the bazooka he had

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out of the right outpost and then kept firing his BAR until he had to retreat to the our main line of defense. Ernie Weinberger was hit with a rifle bullet that pierced his cheek and mouth and exited his other cheek. Abe Lincoln in the left outpost was also firing with his BAR when they were hit. He was in a dazed state of shock when he saw his buddy, Mo Lloyd, shot through the head with blood and brains spilling out of the wound. Lincoln instantly got out and made it back to our line and was then sent back to the Battalion Aid Station with Weinberger.

On our main line of defense, we heard the firing of burp guns and rifles. We saw our men from the outposts running back to us, and we were ready. No one in Love Company was asleep or drunk as the enemy expected the Americans to be on New Year's Eve. We were fully awake when we heard yelling and screaming as the Germans ran toward our line of foxholes. They were calling us all kinds of names, like: "dirty American bastards," but we did not mind the insults. It was the least of our worries.

Immediately, without any order to open fire, they were met with a tremendous fusillade of machine gun and rifle fire. From my position in a foxhole, I got out and crouched behind a tree to be able to see better and move easily. I fired at the gray shadows in front of me with my M1 Garand rifle without taking time to slowly aim and squeeze off each round. There were so many of them coming toward us that it was more important to fire as rapidly as possible. Furthermore, it is almost impossible to see the sights on a rifle at night. Careful aiming was hopeless and a waste of time. The firing from our line was furious and harrowing. We kept shooting and shooting and shooting. It seemed to last for hours. The Germans were drunk with schnapps and gave us very little return fire. It was hard for them to yell curses at us and fire their bolt-action Mauser rifles or their machine pistols accurately while running at us. I do not know how many enemy soldiers were hit in front of us, but I know that their attack was broken. They stopped their charge at us and moved off to our right flank. We had held fast on our line, and it became quiet after a few hours. There was sporadic small arms gunfire and artillery shelling during the following day as we stayed in our positions.

Late in the evening of 2 January 1945, a task force from the 63rd Infantry Division was sent up to take over our position. It was dark, of course, and difficult to orient oneself in this new location for the new troops. They appeared clean-shaven with spotless uniforms and weapons. They were advance units of their division that had arrived at the Vosges Mountains front in defensive positions on 22 December 1944. We placed

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them in our foxholes and told them "Good Luck!" One of them who was probably 18 and just out of high school turned to me, trembling, and asked, "Where are they?" I pointed toward the enemy line and said, "They are over there about 200 yards in front." He trembled as he looked at me and sobbed quietly. There was nothing more I could say.

Later, I thought about these green, young boys sent to the front to relieve us grimy, tough, veteran dogfaces. We were all about the same age. What could I say to them? Don't worry. You'll be alright. It's only a war. Nobody gets wounded or killed. That's just noise you hear. In a little while you'll go home to your mother. Perhaps, I should have told them the philosophy of old dogfaces, like me: You've got to kill or be killed!

After two months of seeing death and destruction, I was tired of it and I felt like a very old man. I had thought for some time that the war was never going to end. Thanksgiving and Christmas and New Year's Day had come and gone, and there was no end in sight. What was the use of fighting? We had been living in the rain and snow during one of the coldest winters in recent European history. We shivered as we trudged out on patrols, and we never felt warm. Death would not have been a bad alternative. I did not tell my thoughts to any of my buddies. Besides, we had to move out to our next battle, and I had to forget such a stupid idea.

The front line on the Seventh Army front was skewed badly after the Nordwind offensive. The 117th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, which had been put into the front line on the right flank of the 100th Infantry Division, fell back five miles when the attack came. Love Company of the 3rd Battalion of the 399th Infantry Regiment held the right flank of the division line, which was now exposed and undefended. The 44th Infantry Division on our division's left flank fell back from their defensive positions also. This left our division with two vulnerable, exposed flanks, because we had held fast along most of our front. Units of the division were moved back to straighten the line. There was a lot of movement on our side to reorganize our positions. In addition, we had to fight the enemy, who was keeping up his attack with artillery and infantry assaults. There was no time to relax and leisurely establish an orderly front.

The Morning Report of 5 January 1945 Record of Events:

2 Jan 45 Left Lemberg Fr 0145 by motor Arrived at Enchenberg Fr 0230 Distance traveled 4 miles.

We left our defensive positions in Lemberg a little after midnight on the day after New Year's.