

First Battle: Alsace-Lorraine, France 1944

by Tom Block, Medic, 397-G

The first twenty-four hours I spent in combat as a medical aidman were tough, every one of them. As a litter bearer, life was comparatively easy. Every night I slept under a roof; three times a day I had a good meal and I shaved whenever I pleased. These are luxuries; though, the real difference, by comparison, was that I was safe in the aid station. No Jerry could slit my throat with twenty buddies sleeping around me. This changed when McGee left the 3rd Platoon, Company G, and I took his place.

I arrived in mid-December 1944. We marched all afternoon. Dusk was well on its way to complete darkness when we finally halted on a hill which apparently was miles from any town. Our lieutenant put us straight on that score, however. We learned that we were just one-half mile from a small town. Later we learned that the town was called Muertehaus (death house), which proved to be all too appropriate.

We dug in the best we could in the cold and dark, maintaining as much silence as possible. I had no bedroll, so I sat up all night. It was not a dull evening, however. Our Long Toms and the German 280s were having an artillery duel, which reminded me of all the Fourth of July celebrations I had ever seen put together. It was hard to realize that men were being killed every time a shell landed; every time an orange flash of fire lit up the entire horizon; and every time a dull blast shook air, trees, and ground for miles around. I was ten miles away from either gun; thankful that I was not in the shells' concussion area and tried to go to sleep sitting up. It wouldn't work, even though the lieutenant was kind enough to let me wear his gas suit which cut the bite from the wind. I believe it was the most miserable night I had ever spent, up to that time. We put on our packs and started. For most of the men it was an old story; for me it was an entirely new one. Eighty-eights opened up on us before we had gone 300 yards. Most of the shells landed in a gully, which ran parallel to the road we followed. The hill we had slept on (or in) the night before was to the rear and to the right of us. Occasionally a shell would land too close for comfort, and I knew that this could not possibly continue without someone's getting hit.

The first GI hit was one of the few I knew, T/4 Homerding, senior aidman of the company and in charge of the First Platoon. "Homer," a man of about forty from Minnesota, had been "asking for it" for four weeks; he never took cover for himself nor had any regard for his personal safety. Fortunately, it wasn't a bad wound; shrapnel lodged in the left bicep. I wrapped his arm and sent him back to the battalion aid station.

At this point the company had to call a halt and go into battle formation. I sat down to rest and immediately a loud cry of "Medic" greeted me. Two men from "Homer's" First Platoon were hit. One had a flesh wound in the right cheek of his buttocks, which wouldn't stop its slow ooze no matter what I did. The other man had a piece of flak in his left pectoral muscle. I was just finishing this man's chest when two fellows dashed up.

"Second Platoon medic is hit bad. Hurry up." I hurried just as fast as I could make my tired legs go (which seemed to me miserably slow). As I ran I was thinking . . . It couldn't be anyone but Bill Muller, the T/3 who, like myself, was out as an aidman for the first time that bloody morning.

One glance was enough to tell me that Bill was in bad shape. He was lying face down, unconscious and in deep shock from loss of blood. He was hit behind the left ear. The mastoid bone was mashed to a pulp and what appeared to be brain was sticking out of the hole. To make matters worse he was lying so that his nose was in the blood. He was drowning in his own blood! I turned him over and sent word for the litter bearers to hurry just as fast as possible. They arrived as I was finishing a Carlisle bandage. Apparently they were on the way to pick up some of the other casualties.

We got Bill on the litter jeep on the double, along with another casualty, who had had the bottom of his foot blown out. Those rebel litter bearers zoomed out of that battle area for the aid station in their jeep as though it were a rocketship.

We fought our way to the edge of Muertehaus in a short time and stayed there and took it for the next four hours.

We were in a church cemetery and the Jerries were pouring it to us with everything they had: 88's, horse drawn mortars, 90mm flaks, burp-guns, machine guns, and snipers. Bullets were bustin' faster than corn pops in a popper. How any of us lived through that still remains a mystery!

Except for Bill Muller, however, no one was hurt badly during that ordeal, and by evening we had been able to return enough fire that the Germans had to retreat. With darkness, the town was ours. After a can of cold C Rations of "franks and beans" we settled ourselves for the night on the second floor of an old school house, which we considered solid luxury.

The score was one aidman dead, one injured, and one bewildered. I agree, "War is hell."

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