

# Foxholes and Fruitcakes, December 1944

by Lowry Bowman, 397-I

*Lowry Bowman, wrote these recollections in 1997 in response to a buddy's request.*

Why are you so distant, cousin? You asked about my ordeal with diarrhea. What a pleasant subject! You always go straight to the heart of things.

The area of northeastern France known as Alsace is roughly on the same latitude as the U.S.-Canadian border, and the winter of 1944–45 was unusually bad. For the most part we lived on the ground, or rather under it.

The whole idea of military-type “uniforms” was abandoned. We had to lay on so much clothing that it became difficult to move. Everybody, of course, wore the traditional “long Johns” next to the skin. Over that came the olive drab wool pants and wool shirt and a wool sweater. Over that came the cotton “fatigue” shirt and pants and field jacket. But everybody improvised, and no two people looked exactly the same. I don’t remember how or where I got it, but somehow I had a garment that was usually issued only to motorized units. It was a pair of wool-lined, canvas duck bib overalls envied by all. That made four layers. We also got reversible parkas with hoods by Christmas, 1944. I remember that particularly because it was so cold that day that your head hurt the same way it used to when, as a child, you took too big a spoonful of ice cream.

Leather boots proved worse than useless in that weather, so we had “shoe pacs” similar to those things farmers buy down at Central Tractor to slosh around the barnyard in—rubber bottoms and leather tops and large enough to accommodate removable felt innersoles and several pairs of wool socks. Problem was they weren’t ventilated in any way, so that after a few minutes of walking even on snow and ice your feet would begin to sweat. Your socks would get wet. Then at night the perspiration would freeze and stick your toes together unless you removed the socks and put them next to your skin to dry out. The only extra garment anyone carried was extra socks. Foot inspection was a mandatory exercise whenever it was possible. Trench foot is real and crippled some.

Regulation wool gloves with leather palms also were worse than useless. Most people had mittens with a phallic-looking appendage for the trigger finger. But my father, who as a chaplain was a privileged person, had sent me a fine pair of leather gloves with removable interior linings.

Of course, everybody had some kind of wool cap that pulled down over the ears, and a few lucky ones had scarves. I never had a scarf. The plastic helmet liner fit down over the wool cap with the actual steel helmet on top, and that formed a natural trap for the steam of your breath to float around and fog up your glasses.

Over all this came a couple bandoliers of ammunition, the rifle which weighed around nine pounds, maybe a couple of hand grenades, canteen, similar impedimenta, the all-important folding shovel (“entrenching tool” in Army parlance) and usually a couple of K rations which came packed in wax cartons about the size of a carton of cigarettes. Even the midgets among us took on the look of giants. I weighed maybe 130–140 pounds, and it’s possible that all this clothing and equipment outweighed me.

I mention all this simply to lead up to the indelicate subject about which you asked via e-mail: with all that stuff on, just how in hell did one deal with the normal bodily functions? And the answer is: not well. Not well at all. Particularly poorly if someone was shooting at you when nature called. In that situation life generally took precedence over sanitation but not always. There were notable exceptions.

(I have never heard this subject discussed in arguments over whether women in the military should be put in combat situations. But then neither have I heard it discussed in arguments over whether men should be put in combat situations).

In an all-male society one could (and some claimed they did) tie a string or shoe lace to the wee-wee in order to find and extract it through various layers of clothing, but attending to function number two took advance planning and plenty of time.

The three types of K rations (labeled, oddly enough, Breakfast, Dinner and Supper) each were inedible in their own way, but only one of them (as I recall) included a small packet of olive drab toilet paper that was generally the most prized item. I think that was in the breakfast ration which also included a lemon or orange powder that could be mixed with snow to make a palatable drink. The breakfast ration also contained a “fig bar” which supposedly promoted “regularity,” that is, instant diarrhea. Little tins of meat in these rations generally contained unidentifiable animal viscera.

(The supper ration had four Chelsea cigarettes in it. That was a brand never heard of before or since, but somebody made millions from it. My government taught me to smoke).

Okay. Now we’re getting close to the down and dirty. Remember, you asked for this. I alluded to it only briefly on page 44 of the history.

When the German Ardennes offensive (later known as the Battle of the Bulge) began on December 16, 1944, my regiment (the 397th) was on a frigid mountainside outside the Maginot Line citadel of Bitche while our sister regiment (the 398th) was attacking those impregnable fortresses. My friend Jim Blackwell and I had had enough time to dig quite an impressive hole in the ground large enough for both of us to stretch out and sleep in, and we had covered it with a roof of pine boughs that were scattered around everywhere by German mortars and artillery. I still associate the smell of evergreens with the smell of death which is one reason I don’t like that greenery at Xmas.

Blackwell was part of the communications team which occasionally had to go back to battalion headquarters, and he had found (stolen) back there a small Coleman stove such as campers use. We had made our hole just about air-tight so that we could light that stove down in it without any light leaking out.

On December 17 or 18 the kitchen Jeep made it up with several bags of Xmas presents from home. Mine from Aunt Mabel contained a necktie and a 5-pound Ann Page fruitcake from the A&P. I should have eaten the necktie and thrown the fruitcake away, but I did the opposite—a really big error in judgment. Blackwell and I lit our Coleman stove and sat down in that hole and ate the fruitcake. The whole thing. I was already sick, anyway, but we knew we would have to get off of that mountain because of the Ardennes offensive, and I didn’t want anything more to carry.

Sometime during the night the fruitcake hit me with megaforce. I shot out of that hole tearing at various layers of clothing. I thought I had succeeded, but it was dark, dark, dark out there in those woods and I had unwittingly backed up to a tree I couldn’t see, and the ricochet deflected that fruitcake bomb right back into a portion of my undies which had to be cut away. I hear you snicker in an evil way.

Only after that happened did I realize I was only semi-conscious. That little Coleman stove had burned up all the oxygen in that airtight hole and replaced it with CO2. I got Blackwell up and out of there just in time.

By morning I was really sick. I asked Captain Grant to let me go back to the kitchen area for a change of britches, but medic Oreste Fata took my temperature and said I was a candidate for the hospital. So I climbed down the mountain to where ambulances were hauling off the 398th Regiment casualties and got aboard one of them. The company morning report for December 19, 1944, lists Pfc. Benjamin L. Bowman 34834054 as “dy to sk.” Duty to sick.

The “hospital” was simply a bunch of pyramidal tents stuck up in the mud a few miles to the rear. Much like the TV set of M\*A \*S\*H. They had canvas cots but also a pot-bellied stove and a crude shower arrangement with real soap and hot water. Heaven on earth.

I was there only a couple of days. I never saw a nurse, a doctor, a medical technician or any other sort of official person, and nobody asked for my name, my illness, my insurance policy, nothing. After a couple of days the diarrhea calmed down. I found somebody in a Jeep who said he was going to the 397th, so he let me ride with him, and I went home. I use the word deliberately. It certainly wasn’t heroism, but I knew I had to get back to the company. The company, particularly your own squad, became closer than family in that situation. It didn’t really matter so much what the orders were so long as you had your family with you. Most of us today have little in common except for that long-ago experience, but we still feel it when we get together.

When the German attack hit us on New Year's Eve, 1944, I was still half sick but thought things were under control. I had gotten clean clothes back at that hospital, but my recollection is that I cut off three layers of them that night with a trench knife and was left with only that flannel-lined canvas bib overall type garment on the legs. Those new parkas given out at Christmas saved me.

That hospital shower arrangement was a portable thing, and after the shooting calmed down in late January or early February they set it up near our kitchen area and let us go back in small groups for a shower and clean clothes. The date is not mentioned in the morning reports. I remember another shower just before the final offensive in March, 1945, but not another one until the war was over. Each one was memorable.

I don't know why you asked for this scatological report, but there it is.  
Icky.

Love to you.  
Elbow

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