

Green Arena on Top of a Ridge

by John Costello, 398-C

As battles go it wasn't that much—a U.S. Army infantry company versus no more than a quarter, perhaps even as little as an eighth, of a German infantry unit of comparable size. Doubtless there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of such little battles having little consequence in the ultimate outcome of World War II.

It was probably atypical of these little, otherwise insignificant battles in that so much about the battle itself, its circumstances, its vague beginning and ragged end, was so very frustrating. There was no clear and undeniable victor, yet there was as much fear, confusion, pain, and death, proportionately, as in battles ten or a hundred times bigger.

It took place in the Vosges, a mountainous part of Alsace-Lorraine, in France in early November 1944. The region is not well-suited for conventional, modern warfare. It is honeycombed with narrow, U-shaped ravines curving and meandering across the country. There are trees aplenty and along with the trees, lots of bushes and plants.

Company C of the 398th Infantry Regiment set out from its steep hillside bivouac to find and fight any element of the German Army with which it came in contact. I was then a rifleman in that company. We hiked and climbed all day over ridges and adjoining narrow valley ravines. Everywhere you looked, the scene was green—not a single green but a whole range of greens. It was also fall, gradually turning into winter.

The day wore on. There were no Germans or any hint of them. A fine rain had joined us since noon and kept on. Over our uniforms we had on our government-issue raincoats, which were something of a joke. They didn't keep off the rain; they acted more like so many sieves. We got wet but far from as wet as we'd have been without raincoats. What kept us from getting wetter was the many layers of clothing we had, much of it wool. (The problem was as much the kind of rain, as much mist as rain. Big raindrops, American style, would have splashed off raincoat surfaces and drained away.)

As dusk neared, the company got the order to settle in for the night. Right where we were, not back at our bivouac. We would not be making camp. We'd already made camp. Our field packs along with certain other accessories were back with our pup tents. What to do? This wasn't right, but reluctantly we accepted having to make do after we learned the officers had made their own arrangements. What we did was dig shallow pits—not foxholes or slit trenches—and cover them with pine branches. It was slow going.

A GI named Allen and I teamed to provide our shelter. The digging wasn't hard. The problem was there were few hatchets and no axes. By the time we got a hatchet there was little daylight left. We cut what we could, but not nearly enough. Night fell and Allen and I tried to resign ourselves to a hard night. The water dripped right in on us. It was miserable and it would get worse. We put up with it as long as we could. Both of us saw others in our platoon going to a large-size pit which had many branches piled on top of it. Sheepishly, hopefully, we begged to be admitted to what seemed the driest of the make-do foxhole/slit trenches around us. They weren't thrilled at our request, but they let us in. I was the last one in. Including Allen there were seven of us GIs in that covered hole, crammed in like sardines. It gave me some solace knowing other guys who'd dug shelters hadn't done much better than Allen and I. For all of us to fit inside this impromptu shelter we "sat," to call it that, with our knees jack-knifed against our bodies.

Precious little rain penetrated the ample pile of foliage over us. This was Sergeant Zehner's handiwork. He was an old regular army professional soldier, not a war volunteer or draftee. Most of what did drip, however, did it on me.

My hands were cold and became more and more swollen as the night wore on. Having a cigarette, and then cupping my hands around the lit end of it, helped me to warm my hands which felt like mittens of ice. A drop of water hit my neck, then trickled down all the way to the tip of my spine. I shivered until that icy drop was gone. I have no idea how often that experience repeated itself over the course of the night.

Conversation on any subject by anyone would have been prized if only someone could have thought of something to say. Once in a great while someone did say something. There were grunts of agreement and then silence.

Matter-of-factly Sergeant Zehner said, "It ain't the war that's hell; it's getting' to the war that's hell." His remark, not really true, was still funny in a wry way, and for us on that interminable night it struck a chord. We all laughed.

The sergeant's remark an hour or so later, though, captured our silent agony poignantly when he blurted, "God, I wish I could have an attack of malaria now! Them chills would be nothin' to this."

As the night inched by, the aching pain along my spine was nearly all I could bear to think about. My buttocks felt like they were immersed in ice. In time I seemed to lose all feeling in that part of my body.

When I didn't shift my position I didn't notice how wet my feet were, so I tried not to shift. Still later that night my butt and spine ached and hurt so much I began rocking back and forth silently in place to shift and dull the pain as much as I could.

I tried not to think of anything. I might have slept some, but I have to doubt it. In the back of my mind I heard a voice repeating over and over "a clean battle," "a clean battle," like some bizarre, desperate mantra.

It must have been about four in the morning that Sergeant Zehner had me get up to go out on guard. I was ever so grateful to be assigned this. I was a logical choice for the duty since I was the one in the platoon who had a watch with a luminous dial.

I could barely move. Many hands pushed me up and out from the relatively warm foliage cocoon into the chilling night. It was cold, but it felt wonderful to be able to move around. Slowly I discovered I still had feeling in my arms and legs, especially the legs. The other mercy was that the rain had stopped.

Walking the guard post I was sure the coming day had to be better than the day and night just passed. That was probably a common hope. We had not yet experienced battle nor fear, nor desperation. Those were things that the new day, not yet dawned, would reveal.

I saw a soft blanket of snowdrift down over Company C huddled beneath its make-shift pine-branch shelters. It kept on for a time and then stopped. Dawn had to be near because I could see the snow. When K-rations were passed out, enough sky was visible to give us hope the rain might not return.

It was after six now. Everyone seemed to be stirring. We just might get back to that original campsite and get a better night's sleep. It was a comforting thought, but premature. GIs were now up and out of their "nests," sarcasm intended. There was some grousing. One soldier comic, imitating our battalion colonel, intoned in mock solemnity, "Go take that hill, men; it's got to be done."

Then the comedian GI, encouraged by a circle of listeners, raised a fist shouting:

"The division is counting on you! The army is counting on you!"

The parody seemed so apt that everyone laughed heartily. Such a thing wasn't going to happen. Why should it, when we were all wet and cold and stiff as boards? Attack? Take some hill? The idea was ridiculous.

No soldier smiled when less than an hour later, the real colonel, looking crisp and dry and rested, his name not recalled, said very much the same thing our GI "Dana Carvey" had shouted to our vast amusement. There were some changes.

"Men, I know you're all tired, hungry, wet, and cold and didn't get a chance to prepare yourselves properly for last night. . . ."

The battalion CO had our undivided attention. He finished his pep talk speech in the best "Brian Donlevy-starring-in-a-French-Foreign-Legion-movie" manner, "Men, there's no other way to say it." Right then his pitch and volume went way up. "You've got to take that hill!"

"What damn hill?" I asked myself. The guys accepted the news quietly and glumly, perhaps a better word is stoically. The order made the GI a prophet, but no one focused on that. We wondered just what hill we would be daring to fight for. Someone had to know or we were in worse shape than we thought.

We were still in the midst of ridges and hills in more varied topography. The hills and ridges weren't all alike, but the intervening ravines were much the same. The question for me was why did we have to take this hill right now? Couldn't we at least get dry first?

No one in the company said anything, but I felt there had been a huge, collective sigh. At any rate we got our stuff together and set off. If guys had reservations about this attack or whatever it was going to be, they kept it to themselves.

Knowing our officers hadn't shared our night of hardship bothered me more than this order to capture some anonymous hill in the Vosges in spite of our physical condition. But, maybe my problem is I have some outlandish ideas about equality in a democracy.

We marched, or more correctly we slid and sidestepped, sometimes almost in single file, up and across and down ridges and the ravine-like valleys much like the terrain we'd traversed the day before. If the enemy expected an attack there might be tree mines or the so-called "bouncing Betty" anti-personnel mines anywhere along our line of approach to this hill. The thought sobered me and made me wary. We might even be ambushed.

We scaled a particularly high ridge and as we approached the crest the word was passed to hush it up. Cresting the ridge the M-1s came off our shoulders. Whether by command or spontaneously I don't know. We held our rifles out in front of us at a diagonal to our bodies, but not at high port, continuing on single file. We moved resolutely across the ridge. I heard no command, but the column turned abruptly left, the entire line turning as one. We moved up the ridge in close to "as skirmishers" formation. The soldiers coming behind did the same, giving us skirmish lines in depth. Thus advancing we followed the crest of the ridge, the ridge increasing in elevation as we kept moving.

Snow from the previous day was melting. Tiny clouds of what looked like frosted mist hung in the air as if suspended from some unseen ceiling, looking like nothing so much as huge balls of carnival cotton candy. These "clouds" were not three feet off the ground.

The scene seemed so surreal and we, as infantry bound into war, seemed out of place as if we had suddenly come upon a stage setting for some children's play, or even something more sublime. What was strangest was that I felt eerie and yet oddly comforted by this peculiar scene.

We pressed on, the surrounding mist seeming to muffle our approach. In any case there was almost no noticeable sound of our passing—a full infantry company deployed in skirmish lines, the lines advancing in uneven surges.

There seemed a special stillness now, a virtual hush as we pressed on ever higher, the terrain steeper and more rugged than ever. It was like the hush in a church, but this was no church. Did I, did we, sense some incongruous closeness to God? Who can say? Even the possibility of such a thing is not logical.

Now the mist divided itself into what looked like a series of curtains. We kept on, resolute, deliberate. Then, abruptly, the ground a hundred or more feet ahead jugged up well over a hundred feet higher than the earth beneath our feet. We slowed to a stop. The bluff facing us was too hard to scale front on. A way up from a side was needed to get us up to the top. We edged around this up-thrust earth, climbing back and forth over outcropped ledges. Ultimately we gained our objective, the surface of a fairly level plateau.

This higher ground was different from the plant-and-tree environment we'd become used to. There were far more varieties of plant life plus the trees were closer together. Two things about the place struck me as memorable. One was the increased profusion of green plants now around us. The other was that with all this densely-packed vegetation there were no good lines of sight in any direction.

We moved unsurely in this high ground Eden. Suddenly there were shots—fast and scattered. Then there were more shots, and I realized it wasn't from us. There were a few more shots I knew were ours, then stillness.

This was it for sure. All of us were down now, prone, as the Army has it, our M-1s in position. We were more than ready, but our eagerness was tempered by not knowing what happened. We had little idea of what was what. Unsure, we waited. I saw no German soldier, and only the barest movement.

Ten or fifteen yards to my left Thomas Mahn, a platoon BAR man, rose to an upright position and began firing his Browning Automatic Rifle. He fired several short bursts, then emptied the rest of his magazine sweeping from side to side in large arcs. It looked to me like he fired indirect fire, firing upward at 30 degrees with the horizontal, rather than level and straight. No sound was heard for another minute or two, then he resumed firing his weapon, sweeping now in ever wider arcs as he did. The noise was awesome. A BAR is fearsome thing. The sound was reassuring. We had firepower, too.

At the time I thought what he did was foolish bravado, especially his standing up to fire, but in hindsight it was okay, because somebody needed to do something.

My eye caught movement in the leaves at the edge of a large green bush directly to my front twenty or thirty yards distant. I sighted on the spot and squeezed off two rounds with my Garand. Many other GIs were now firing along with me. The shooting kept on sporadically for some little time, then ceased.

It isn't too likely we did much damage to the Jerries that day. I doubt many of us even saw any. The firing established where we were. The Germans took advantage.

One American GI was killed in the first spate of gunfire. It turned out he was some fifty yards in front of where I'd hit the ground. But for my own reluctance to go forward more when I couldn't see what was ahead of me, that dead soldier might have been me.

We realized in time that our German adversaries had slipped away. We were up on our feet, unsure of what to do or where to go. An enemy gun battery, with possible help from a mortar section, made the decision for us.

First there was a far-off sound like a huge hiss followed quickly by a succession of swooshing sounds. Jerry artillery firing at us. Everyone hit the ground. A piercing whistle reached our ears just before the first shell went off well beyond us.

After that a series of shells came at us. They were 88mm shells with which, in time, we'd become all too familiar. We were in mortal danger now and no mistake. A piercing whistle preceded each artillery round. All these were way off target.

I heard the distinctive clink of entrenching shovels being used. We all had one. What on earth was I waiting for? They'd have the range sooner rather than later. I fumbled to get at my shovel, officially an entrenching tool. Then all of a sudden, I realized that there were more booming explosions than announcing whistles. This meant that in addition to the 88s, deadly by themselves, the Jerries were raining mortars down on us as well. I got a quick adrenaline rush. Like knowing there are two bears after you, not just one.

Welcome to the modern battlefield, American gentlemen! I might have only seconds to live, but I wanted very much to stay alive. I dug frantically on my knees, my chest inches above my knees, not the way they teach you to get yourself below ground level, but this wasn't basic training. I had incredible energy.

A different desperate mantra, "you're taking too long," "you're taking too long," kept echoing in my head, dirge-like. I couldn't erase it from my mind, but I couldn't stop digging either. The shells interspersed with silent, lethal mortars were coming in more often now and they were all on target, the 88s exploding well overhead in the trees.

I heard soldiers moaning and crying out, but my own desperation and imagined clumsiness kept me bent over my urgent task. Wasn't I one of the few still digging?! How could I still be alive?! I heard a piercing scream of pain, and glancing to my right saw Kicineck, another BAR man, rise and turn, revealing an ugly, gaping wound in the middle of his back. I couldn't look; I couldn't help him! Things were bad and getting worse.

A shell burst right over me, showering the area and me with wood fragments. It had made a direct hit on a tree. I didn't pause to savor my good luck; I hadn't the time!

An unlikely sound again to my right made me look against my better judgment. Private Weeks had stuffed a twig in his mouth and bit down. I kept digging, recalling my own father once on all fours, a block of wood in his mouth to keep from screaming, the result of a souvenir of the war before this one.

Don't think, just dig! More 88s are coming. I was sure one would nail me. How could I escape? Yet, one by one the lethal rounds passed over. If I could just finish I had a chance!; then I did! The trench was done!

I dropped into it, breathing unbelievably hard. All I had to worry about now was a direct hit, a shell hitting exactly above me, or in my trench. I tried not to think. I only wanted to rest.

For an interminable amount of time I heard no violent sound. This blessed silence lasted, and then there were aid men among us taking care of the wounded. Warily I got up from what might be my final resting place. It seemed almost wrong that I hadn't been hurt when it had taken me so long to dig below ground and GIs all around me had been badly hurt and even killed.

The lack of noise—the virtual stillness—let us, the survivors, know the “battle” was over. Our adversary wasn't nearly as numerous as we or they'd have attacked after the 88 and mortar barrages. They didn't, so maybe it had been a small force against us. In any case we weren't going to stay to occupy this high green arena in the mountains of the Vosges. Our casualties accomplished little. If we'd indeed taken the hill, we'd paid an enormous price.

I never saw Allen or Weeks or Kicineck again. The soldier shot and killed in the early battle was named “Rinehardt” or something close. The worst of it was that he had three children. Knowing this I wished I had died, not him. I had no girlfriend and might never have. Kicineck was killed or badly hurt I'm sure. He was a good, capable soldier. He had devised an ingenious handle for his BAR that allowed him to carry it at its exact balance point. He was the kind of man who, had he survived, would have worked to bring about a better world. I know Thomas Mahn survived.

I never learned of the fates of the other GIs I mentioned. I was far too tired and too preoccupied trying to be a good soldier and surviving to inquire. It all became moot after I was transferred to the reconstituted Company A, 398th Infantry following the capture of the original Company A not many weeks later. As it was, the platoon and the company, too, were never the same afterward. I'd lost friends. I came to feel like a stranger.

The march of we who had survived back to our bivouac—if the weary column of soldiers trudging back could be called a march—was more like the stunned survivors of some coal mine disaster than a company of combat infantry on the march. We walked and stumbled for I don't know how many miles through continuous rain. We kept falling into two and three-foot deep holes full of water all along our way.

We weren't the same Company C that left our bivouac two days before. When everyone got up in the morn morning the day after we'd come back from the battle, we knew it. That battle, of course, had been our very first experience of war.

Napoleon supposedly said that the importance of bravery in battles has been overrated. What is really important, according to him, is the capacity of soldiers to endure unending and interminable fatigue. He might have added enduring the weather, too.