

First Day of Combat Through the Sight of a BAR

by Mel Denham, 399-F

Dianna Hadlock, daughter of SSgt. Mel Denham, sent her father's account of his WWII experiences that he wrote in 1981 for his grandchildren. We join him as he enters combat in France.

We marched in there, we waited until dark and then they moved us into these positions. They'd brought in these guys that had been up there fighting for a week or two. They'd been hit so badly and they'd brought them out and they moved all of our guys in. They told us to dig a foxhole. Moved in there about 10 or 10:30 at night. We had dug foxholes all over down in Georgia-Fort Benning and in North Carolina. We knew how to dig foxholes, but we didn't know how to dig them in that wet. As fast as we'd dig them, they just fill level-full of water. Just like on the ocean beach, how you dig a hole and fill it full of water. The ground was so waterlogged and there was so much rain that they'd just fill level-full with water.

We did get those foxholes done, but we couldn't get in them because they were so full of water. The Germans evidently heard us moving in and they threw a shell, attack at us at about 2:00 am. It was cold—it was freezing. All of us had to run and jump in those foxholes full of water. We stayed down in there with our heads down and water up to here on our necks. We stayed there until the shelling was over. The shelling killed two or three of our guys that first night. We had to crawl back out and it was so cold that the next morning several of our guys were frozen stiff—just icicles all over. Men had to rub circulation back into them to thaw them out. That was the beginning of the combat.

We started off the next morning about 6 am. They made us start and said we were going over the top of a mountain and down on the other side. We got over that mountain, but we ran into two or three dead Germans. We had to send somebody up around searching to see if they weren't lying there playing possum or something. Check them for any credentials or anything. Then we knew we were getting real close. That's the first time I'd really seen dead guys.

We got down through this valley, and because I was BAR man I was right up next to Lt. Emery with his scout. We started up the side of the hill, all of sudden we spotted the Germans up on top of the hill and they opened up fire on all of our guys that were coming across this meadow. I was up far enough on the hill that I set up my old BAR. I got right down where they built a road through the mountain and I could even see these German's machine guns just spraying out guys. I opened up my BAR and began spraying the whole area—700 rounds of ammunition. All of a sudden they started firing bullets right at me and I didn't know, but they began kicking dust all around me. Lt. Emery said, "Denham, move! Move! They've got you spotted." I dropped down in this road and I ran a ways, then I stuck my head back up again—berrrrrrrrrrrr (machinegun fire) all over. Then I saw a machine gun in a nest. I left my BAR, slipped around to the back, and got in real close, then I lobbed a hand grenade in and blew up those guys in the machine-gun nest.

By that time most of our guys had gotten up on the side of the mountain. They took 120 to 140 guys prisoner and the rest of Germans took off and went up over the hill.

We went over the hill and by the time we got through combat that day, we'd had taken the hill alright, but we'd had started with about 14 men in our squad and had lost, I think, two of them, one by the name of Parker from Kentucky, was shot through the Adam's apple, they took him back. Another one was shot in the knee.

The next day we went on over the hill, and we didn't meet any resistance. Our captain read his map and we had gone too far. We were now clear over into the German area where we shouldn't have been. We went across this railroad bridge and he sets Webb and me way out on this corner and had all the other guys dig in there. There was already a bunch of foxholes dug there, the Americans had been there first and lost and now they were coming back. They stuck us way up here on this end and another BAR man way out on the other end. They would always put the BAR men on the flanks by the road where in case

the enemy comes in they can put up the firepower while the other guys can get out or whatever. We were out there, ol' Webb and I. They told us, "Don't dig, and don't make any noise." Webb and I had just been there for just a few minutes and all of a sudden we looked up and here comes a German down the road. He had his rifle, swinging his arms, and in fact, he acted like he was out squirrel hunting. We quickly sent the message back to the Americans that we had the enemy in sight. They'd all got down in their holes. They told us to watch that guy until he was really close and then pull the trigger. He hit the dust. I'll never forget it. That really upset me. That was the first day I'd been in combat. That was the first guy—I don't know how many, if any, I'd killed with that grenade, but I didn't actually see them. I went over to this guy, he was lying there in the road dead, we'd hit him about three or four times, we searched him, pulled out his wallet and opened it up, It had a picture of his wife and two little kids. That just really got me, because I was looking right in his face realizing that I'd killed somebody's father who had little kids. They were just like we were.

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