

## LOVE COMPANY

### THE FIRST BATTLE

On 1 November 1944, in the fastest deployment in U.S. military history of an entire infantry division, the 3rd platoon of Love Company was the first rifle unit to move into the front line to relieve troops of the 45th Infantry Division. We were the last for roll call, last in a parade, last to board the ship, but first to disembark and first to enter combat.

We dug foxholes that had three men in each one. As night fell, we could see flashes in the sky followed by the boom of cannon fire. It was an uneasy feeling being in a hole in the ground with two other soldiers peering into the blackness, tensely listening to all the eerie and strange sounds that come in the night. Was it some enemy movement? It could be an enemy patrol. There might be an assault on our front or maybe an attack from the flank. No green soldier at the front sleeps soundly that first night.

Al Lapa remembers being assigned to an old French Army dugout from World War I with John Bolin and Angelo Argiris where there was about two inches of water covering half of the bottom. It rained all night and the log roof leaked, and none of them got much sleep. Toward morning, Bolin and Lapa thought they heard noises in front of their position and challenged, "Who goes there?" When they received no reply, Bolin fired his BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) and Lapa joined in with his M1 rifle. Then the whole platoon started firing, but there was no return fire. Daylight revealed just shredded branches. I suspect that some rabbit or other animal made the noises that brought on the fusillade. We soon learned to attune our hearing to most of the strange sounds that are part of the forest world at night.

On 3 November 1944 we moved up to relieve a rifle company of the 45th Infantry Division that was in danger of being surrounded. They were pinned down by small arms fire from the German line. As we were passing through, some of the soldiers of the 45th smirked and thought that we were very green. That was true. We did not know anything at all about what lay ahead. We carried full field packs that contained much equipment that we later learned we did not need. Nevertheless, they were happy to see us and to get much needed relief.

Ahead of us were the wooded slopes of the lower Vosges Mountains that the enemy was defending stubbornly. As we advanced, we were

## LOVE COMPANY

immediately subjected to the same intense small arms fire from the enemy. They were dug into camouflaged defensive positions and were firing machine guns that spewed bullets at twice the rate of ours. These “burp” guns fired 1,600 rounds per minute against our 900 rounds per minute. They also had rapid-fire machine pistols that were called “Schmiessers,” bolt-action Mauser rifles, and concussion hand grenades shaped like oversized eggs that they threw at us. We fired back with our semi-automatic Garand M1 rifles and BAR automatic rifles. We had some support from our .30 caliber light and heavy machine guns, which are not mobile weapons. They cannot be used in a close infantry attack with their tripod mounts, ammunition belts, and extra barrels to replace burned-out ones. They each require a gunner and an ammunition bearer to operate, which makes them most useful for defense against an enemy attack or for cover during an infantry advance.

Meanwhile, all around us, the smell of gunsmoke filled the air and the noise of gunfire was deafening. I lay behind a tree with my 1903 sniper’s rifle trying to see something to aim at. Nearby I could hear an M1 rifle going full blast. Eight rounds were fired and the ammunition clip flew out of the cartridge chamber. Another clip of eight rounds was thrown in and they were fired. At this point I yelled to Lapa, “Hey! Skull! What are you firing at?” He yelled back, “I don’t know, but I am going to scare the hell out of them!”

Then I heard someone yell, “MEDIC! MEDIC! I’M HIT!” At that same moment, I heard and felt the crack of a rifle bullet fly right by my head. Instinctively, I looked up into a tree directly in front of me about 50 yards away and saw a puff of smoke. Though I could not see anyone, I aimed my sniper’s rifle at that spot and fired each of the five rounds in my rifle. Each time I fired, I had to pull back the bolt, eject the spent cartridge shell, and push the bolt forward to insert a new round into the chamber. My rifle gave me and my shoulder a powerful jolt each time I fired a round and the smoke from the muzzle kept me from seeing if I had hit anything.

Now I had to reload my bolt-action rifle. Because of the telescopic sight mounted over the breech opening, I could not feed the clip of five rounds at one time. I had to take each round off the clip and load one at a time. As I was doing this, the firing all around me kept up at a furious pace. Suddenly, I heard a voice almost in a whisper say, “Nicht schiessen!” I looked to my right, and there was a German soldier no more than six feet away, staring me in the face! “Nicht schiessen? Don’t shoot?” I

## LOVE COMPANY

wondered! My rifle was not even loaded! He could have easily shot me or bayoneted me before I could have defended myself!

Somehow, I was more surprised than frightened as I stared at him. I pointed with my rifle for him to move down the hill to the rear of our line. I held my rifle on him and crawled back down the hill after him. He was frightened and trembled as he walked in front of me with his hands on his head. When I searched him, he became agitated because he thought I wanted to take the bread he had in his pocket! It turned out that he had no weapon, grenade or ammunition.

As he was marching off into the 45th Infantry Division area, one of their men said to me, "Let's see how big a hole you can put in his back." That struck me as insane, because I could have been dead just a few minutes before. Besides, if we shot every enemy soldier who wanted to surrender, none ever would. The result would be a total disaster with more dead soldiers on both sides. The stories of the killing of prisoners of war on the Russian Front were heard on our front. Nevertheless, the war was over for that German, but not for me. From that moment on, I knew I had received a gift of time that I prayed would last until the end of the war.

I rejoined my platoon and continued the fire fight. The Germans were routed, and we pushed through to new positions beyond the woods. Later, 1st Lt. Park Ashbrook, our company executive officer, told me I had hit the sniper in the tree. When I said that I hadn't seen anything when I was firing, he said he saw him fall to the ground. Then it came to me that the sniper fire had stopped after I had shot those five rounds into the tree. (Frank Hancock of M Company, which is a heavy machine gun and mortar company, recalls that he had followed us on this attack and found a dead German soldier who had been killed by a bullet wound in his chest. (Perhaps, he had been the enemy sniper.)

In this baptism of fire, the men of Love Company had faced the enemy in relief of a company of the veteran 45th Infantry Division and proved themselves ready and able. Fortunately they had only a few casualties. Their war had just begun with a small victory. But it would go on and on for many months though they did not know it.

The Morning Reports of 3 and 4 November 1944:

*1 SWA and 2 LWA. Also 1 NBC GSW self inflicted.* (SWA - Severely wounded in action; LWA - Lightly wounded in action; NBC - Not battle connected; GSW - Gun shot wound).

## LOVE COMPANY

### RECONNAISSANCE PATROLS

We now were on the front with our own piece of real estate to defend and from which we were to attack the enemy. The first order of combat is to find the enemy and to know his position and strength. That meant reconnaissance patrols – a job that we had been trained for in maneuvers when no one was shooting at us.

In the Vosges Mountains, the hills are covered with forests and visibility is almost always poor. It rained sometime during every day and this added to the limited visibility. The first patrol to be sent out was led by a technical sergeant who was regarded as the toughest platoon sergeant in the company. He warned his men that no matter how tough maneuvers were in training at Fort Bragg, it would be hell and ten times worse when they went into combat. No noncom was more highly regarded than he was.

With a squad from his platoon, he led a night reconnaissance patrol from our line of foxholes toward the German line. They were to seek out the enemy positions, but not to engage in combat. That meant that they had to form the patrol with a point scout, followed by the leader of the patrol about 5 or 6 yards behind the point, and the rest of the squad spread out with flank guards.

It is not easy to find your way at night through no-man's-land with a compass and the fear that your enemy is waiting for you in a foxhole ready to kill you. You worry about making noise, because the snapping of a twig underfoot sounds like the falling of a tree in the cold, crisp night air. Those thoughts must have hit the sergeant as he set out, because he froze up shortly after leaving the American front line and fell to sobbing and trembling. The patrol managed to reach enemy lines, where they received small arms fire, and returned with the sergeant in tow. On 15 November 1944, he was sent back to an Army hospital on sick leave.

(On 11 December 1944, the sergeant returned to the company and on 14 December 1944 he went on sick leave again. On 16 December 1944, he reported back to the company and on 26 December 1944 he was reduced to private. His MOS was 745 rifleman but I believe he was assigned to the kitchen.)

I could not find it in my heart to condemn him, because he was given a responsibility greater than his ability to handle it. His bravado had

## LOVE COMPANY

been an act to bolster his courage, but fear shattered his facade. Yet every good soldier knows fear and does not let it stop him from doing his duty, which is keeping faith with his fellow soldiers. He cannot break the bond that unites soldiers in battle. Patriotic songs and speeches about love of country are not the cement that binds infantry dogfaces together. It is mutual survival and getting out alive.

Reconnaissance patrols, on foot, were assigned to the infantry riflemen and no other unit. It was the most disliked duty for a dogface. In daytime, it was somewhat easier to know what was ahead of you, but it was nerve-racking at night with only heavenly light to guide you, if there was any. All the time we were in the line, a patrol would be sent out almost every day. Fortunately, the job was shared on a rotating basis with nine rifle squads in the company. Machine gunners, mortarmen, cooks, supply men, and clerks never went on reconnaissance patrols. Our officers sometimes led patrols.

The purpose was always to probe the enemy lines to see if he was still there and if he had changed in any way. Had he moved in additional troops or had he moved out to a different location? If an enemy soldier was captured and brought back with the patrol, that was a bonus, but that seldom happened. As we would try to sneak close to the enemy line, one of them would see us and open fire, which brought more enemy fire down on the patrol. When that happened, we would know where the enemy was and how much small arms fire power he had. The patrol would then scoot back to the safety of our front line.

Inviting the enemy to shoot at you so that you can find out his position is not something that a dogface GI ever gets used to. On one assignment, our squad leader was instructed by our captain to take his men on a patrol that was to follow a road shown on a map. Then he would cross railroad tracks, pass by another wooded area, and continue on for about a mile to another crossroads. At that point, the squad had to be alert for enemy forces.

As the eight of us moved out, we walked in the woods parallel to the road to give us cover. After about a quarter mile, we reached the railroad tracks, which ran through a clearing in the woods. To our left where the road crossed the railroad tracks, there was a small hut for a railroad guard who stopped traffic when a train arrived. There was smoke coming out of the chimney of the hut, which had windows that offered a clear view of the tracks in both directions. We moved one at a time across the tracks to the woods on the other side without any trouble. After another hundred

## LOVE COMPANY

yards, the woods ended and we stopped to look across the clearing. We saw some activity. It was the enemy digging in machine gun positions! We were quite sure that they saw us, but they did not open fire or pursue us. Since this was a reconnaissance patrol, we immediately turned around to return to our lines at a very brisk pace.

We came back to the railroad tracks and had to cross them one at a time. The first man crossed without incident. The second man was shot at from the railroad guard house, but was not hit. Each of us had to tear across in a crouch to make as small a target as possible. One man stopped in the middle of the tracks to retrieve his helmet, which had fallen off his head because he had not buckled his chin strap. Only one man was hit, but the bullet caromed off his ammunition belt and did not hurt him. Fortunately, these eight ducks in a shooting gallery got back to the company safely.

The sergeant reported to the captain that the Germans had dug into positions just beyond the railroad tracks and that they were infantry, with machine gun emplacements. When the captain heard this, he said, "There are no Krauts there! Army intelligence has reported that they are way beyond those woods!" The bullet-torn ammunition belt was offered as proof. Nevertheless, another patrol was sent out to confirm our report. It was maddening when someone in the rear echelon thought he knew more than the man on the front line and because of his rank, gave orders that could cause unnecessary deaths.

## LOVE COMPANY

### FOXHOLE "LIVING"

While I was at the front in a foxhole I had a limited idea of who was in the company. There was no mess hall, rec room or PX, to exchange scuttlebutt with other GIs. There were no formations for reveille or retreat. There was no roll call. I could only relate to the buddies in my foxhole and to those in the nearby foxholes. A foxhole on the front line was a very lonely place. A dogface was told nothing and could not tell what to expect next. He was there just to follow orders.

From the first day we got into the line, it rained sometime during every day. We wore shoepacks, which were boots that were half rubber and half leather. The lower foot part was made of rubber. The upper part from the ankle to midcalf was made of leather with boot laces. Inside, the soles were lined with two heavy felt pads. With the mud and water we lived in, they were much better than the combat boots we might have had. The shoepacks kept water out, but they also did not allow any air in to permit our sweaty feet to dry. It also happened that when we got water in the boots, we just squished along until we could find a safe area to take them off and let them dry out.

We had raincoats that were almost useless, because they did not keep us warm and they did not completely repel rain. My shoulders were soaked inside the raincoat when we had a steady rain. These raincoats were waterproof only in the pockets, where they kept water from flowing out. This was very good, because we could wash our hands after eating or after going to visit Mother Nature.

It was small consolation that the enemy was also in the same circumstances as we were. We were living in a hole in the ground where we usually built a roof made of branches, covered with dirt and leaves to camouflage our position. This kept out some of the weather, especially at night, when the temperature would drop to a subzero, teeth-chattering coldness. We covered the dirt floor with small pine branches that cushioned the hardness and dispersed the mud. No fires were ever made in the hole, because they could be seen for miles at night and invited unwanted guests wearing German uniforms.

Cigarettes were smoked by almost every GI because they were included in our K rations and sold for five cents a pack of twenty when you

## LOVE COMPANY

bought them at the Post Exchange. To smoke a cigarette at night in a foxhole required lighting it quickly in the most secluded part of the hole and cupping your hands around the flame. Then every drag had to be taken near the bottom of the hole with your hands hiding the glow, which could be seen for a mile. I enjoyed a smoke then because it seemed to calm the nerves and gave a feeling of being in another world where civilized people lived.

In time, you found that while living in a hole you could adapt to conditions when things were quiet. You could use your helmet as a basin. Pour water in it and bathe by using a wash cloth and some soap and sometimes shave the beard. Living in that hole with two other guys who lived and sometimes died in the same clothes called for an outlook on life that was morbidly called "foxhole humor." Bill Mauldin's cartoons for the Army newspaper Stars and Stripes usually caught the irony of the experiences we had every day.

It was not unusual for a GI in a foxhole to get out and hurry a discreet distance away in order to defecate. This was always an involved procedure starting with digging a small cat-hole for the burial of the deposit, unlayering six plies of clothing, and balancing oneself so that nothing was accidentally soiled. Oftentimes, the enemy would inconveniently lob in mortar shells or 88mm artillery fire. What to do? Dive for the ground? Pull up your britches and run back to the foxhole? Or just say "To hell with them!" and finish your chore? As you accepted your fate in the war, you usually chose the third option.

I found that there came a time when nothing seemed to bother me. My hands thickened and my face was bearded and tough from the constant exposure outdoors in the cold and the rain and the snow. I could crush the lit end of a cigarette with my fingers or put my hands over a fire and not feel anything. Not only was this numbness physical, but it was mental, too. I plodded along shuffling from one position at the front to another, slogging through mud, following the Joe in front of me or leading the stragglers behind me. I moved like an old, tired, and demented man until that moment when another battle began.

The monotonous diet of K rations provided nourishment, but I dreamed of fresh food such as steak or chicken or even an egg. Every day for weeks I had to open a box that contained my rations: a packet of powdered coffee or lemonade or broth that I dissolved in chlorinated water in my canteen cup. The entree was a can of Spam or chicken or cheese eaten with a few salted crackers. The dessert was a prune and raisin fruit bar, or



## LOVE COMPANY

a nonmeltable chocolate bar. Then, to top off the repast, there was a pack of four cigarettes.

The entire K ration came in a wax-coated box that was easily converted into a small, stove-like heater. I cut a hole near the bottom on each wide side of the box with my bayonet and lit the top edge. The holes permitted a draft of air to circulate up through the box and let the flame burn from the top all the way down to the bottom. This made it possible to heat water to a boil in a canteen cup for soup or coffee. For variety, I would cook the Spam in the broth or make some other concoction. I never got sick, but I know I lost any excess fat on my body.

Though hot meals were seldom served at the front, Charlie Brigandi, one of our cooks, told me that they always tried to get hot food to us when there was a quiet time on the line. They would drive a Jeep up with a trailer that held big kettles of hot meat and potatoes and hot brewed coffee and would park a few hundred yards behind our foxholes. Then a few men at a time would go back to the chow line, fill their mess kits and canteen cups, and return to their holes. They would be followed by a few more men who went to the chow line. Charlie said that the cooks were always nervous there, because sometimes the Germans spotted the activity and mortar-fired the chow line. That would end the hot meal as the kitchen crew scurried back to the rear. I truly believe he felt guilty when he could not bring us hot food, but it was a welcome treat when he did.