

AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

Second edition, 1997 (rev. March, 2007, June, 2008)

PROLOGUE

"War talk, by men who have been in a war, is always interesting, whereas moon talk, by a poet who has not been in the moon is likely to be dull."

- Mark Twain: "Life on the Mississippi," chapter 45 (1883)

A beautiful spring day in 1975: Thirty years since the ambush at Beilstein Hill. My daughter asks, "So what's this about April 18th?" When I tell her about that day, she says, "Dad, why don't you write it all down. Then we'll know where you went and what happened." Her request is reason enough to start this story for our grandchildren and for their children - and to share the ghosts that haunt us forever.

Once started, memories pour onto paper, like junk falling from Fibber McGee's closet. Numbers branded in memory, trigger vivid recollections whenever they appear unbidden in daily life. Each is a key that opens a picture; Fire Engine Company 13; Scout Troop No. 86; Streetcar No. 32; the 100th Division; the 399th Regiment; and the German 88 mm cannon. Days that haunt are also numbered: December the 7th; November 15; and April the 18th.

The "famous letter to Sharon" fills 35 crowded single-spaced, typed pages. One copy, resting on my shelf, acquires a life of its own as it accumulates notes in the margins. Letters and stories arrive from other men of Company M. "The book" grows, as we try to recapture, or remember, the strength and arrogant swagger of our youth.

Retirement, twenty years later, brought time to consolidate notes, exchange letters and visits. The 35 pages expanded to 120, in an attempt to unleash this little story, dwarfed by the complex factors and millions of people, swept up by World War II.

The 200 copies of the first edition were printed in August of 1995, and "sold out" within a year. It brought many favorable comments, ("Couldn't put it down!"), a dozen corrections, and enough new material to justify a second edition, revised herein to incorporate a few corrections and minor additions.

What little I garner here is dedicated to the men of Company M who did not come home, and to the survivors who have served the country well in war and peace. Many family members responded; "He never talked about it, and now, from your book, I learn about what he went through. Thank you!"

Company M went to war with a Table of Organization strength of 166 men. My research indicates that during the near- 6 months of combat, the Company suffered 17 killed in action, 2 captured, about 150 wounded in action, and an unknown number lost to trench foot, frostbite, hepatitis, and other causes. "The List" of men who served in Company M includes some 350 names. While the 100th Division was in training in "The States" it provided replacements for combat divisions, and a few volunteers went to Airborne Divisions. There is no way to count the number of these men who left the Company before we went to France.

Our Army came home and scattered to the four winds. Now the old veterans think back often on the glorious days of their youth. If it is to be shared, it must be done quickly, for our ranks are thinning rapidly. More than half were already dead when I wrote this, in the summer of 1997. Now, in June of 2008, 3/4 of them are gone.

One old soldier put it this way:

"I listen vainly for the witching melody of faint bugles blowing reveille, of far drums beating the long roll. In my dreams I hear again the crash of guns, the rattle of musketry, the strange mournful mutter of the battlefield."

- Douglas MacArthur's Farewell Address -

Now, we hear only two bugle calls;

"First Call" - at the racetrack, - and

"Taps" - at our Memorial services.