

Thad Samorajski's Recon Patrol

by Thad (Sam) Samorajski, 398-A

My experience with death on a grand scale occurred during my first patrol into enemy territory. Combat in the Vosges Mountains of France during the fall of 1944 was very personal. It was nasty and brutal stuff. No place for tanks, planes and other sophisticated articles of war. Just men with rifles running around and solving problems the old-fashioned way.

My first patrol. I can see, and feel and taste it even now. A group of G.I.s scattered about on the forest floor. Some talk, some munch on rations, some rest on the snow covered ground. All keep an eye on the nearest foxhole in the event of an incoming shell.

They are a motley group; tired, and already weary of war. There is little effort at hygiene. Same old clothes day after day. Same dirty unshaven faces with blood-shot eyes. No brushing of teeth. No toothpaste. No brush. Just gag down a can of C-rations if you can, followed by a trip to the nearest tree. Not much in at the oral end; not much out on the anal, but lots of urination for some strange reason.

A soldier emerges from the Company Command Post and heads in the direction of the Fourth Platoon. I am a member of the Fourth Platoon and the tough-looking character heading my way is my Sergeant. His eyes fix me in a way that leaves little doubt that I am in for some activity. His lips begin to move. "Sam, grab your rifle and get your ass over here." More gruff words to some folks nearby and several more "volunteers" are recruited. It's to be a patrol and I am designated as "point men." "Aw shit Sarge, why me?" "You know that I'm a lover and not a fighter." The Sarge responds. "Well, boy, I just nominated you to be a fu**in fighter so get your ass rolling toward that hill up front. The Captain wants to know if there are any Krauts up there. Lock and load!"

I am genuinely pissed. My friend Paul and I spent most of the night on outpost duty behind a machine gun. It was tough duty because the Germans often moved around at night and we were positioned to be the first point of contact should they decide to probe our perimeter. It was bitterly cold and no chance for sleep. The night finally passed and no Germans but by early dawn, the tension and cold finally got to us. I began to shake real bad. "Christ it's cold," I whispered to Paul. "I'm so cold I can't stop shaking." "Yeah, me too" responded Paul, and began to eat a can of C-rations. Paul always ate when he was scared. Now it was several hours later and the sergeant looked like he meant business. Nobody screwed around with our Sergeant—not even the officers.

It was snowing again and getting colder. In spite of the cold, beads of sweat began to break out. Funny how it always collected on your back and trickled down into your pants. The gut tightens, the mouth goes dry. Fear surges but is suppressed. Up in front of us, perhaps just a few hundred yards away, are the Germans. Mostly kids like us. The muscles tighten and legs begin to move. The ultimate hunt is about to begin. Man against man, and surprisingly, it's exciting. Perhaps a hormone left over from primeval days has kicked in and aroused some hidden passion. The entire patrol begins to move—skilled craftsmen in the stupid game of war. There is a final check about the password with the perimeter guards and then into the contested zone.

Movement is cautious now and the eyes and ears work at fever pitch. God how the heart pounds. I wonder how far the sound of it carries. There is also that strange, sweet smell again. Combat troops recognize it. The smell of something once living but now dead. A dense pallor of smoke from the artillery fire blends with the grey snow-laden sky. Exploding shells and the occasional burst of machine gun fire in the distance reaches the ears. There is something for the eyes too. The spoils of war litter the forest floor. A stack of German mines lies next to a tree, a bunch of American combat packs and some C-ration cans protrude through the snow under another. Both sides have quartered here and left for safer ground. Where are the Germans? We have got to find them. They have artillery and mortars somewhere up in the hills and plaster the Hell out of anything that moves. Our Company has been ordered to move up tomorrow and take them out.

A shell whistles through the air and explodes a scant hundred yards to our front. There is instant communion with Mother Earth. Another shell bursts off to the left but farther away. A cascade of snow

and broken branches from the savaged trees tumbles to the forest floor. Still that sweet nauseating smell of something dead. We are up again and moving, desperately searching the terrain ahead.

Silence. The Gods of War are at rest-but not for long. The air above is pierced by the shriek of a shell. Christ! I wonder. Is it one of ours going out or one of theirs coming in? Seems damn important to know somehow. And where the hell are the fu**in Krauts? Guess he's trying to tell me to head for the ridge on my right. I begin to crawl, rifle cradled in my arms and belly in the snow. The rest of the patrol edges up, careful, cautious, rifles forward. The ridge line is up ahead. Real damn careful now. There may be some Germans waiting on the other side. Christ that damn smell again! I feel like throwing up but can't. We continue moving. At last-just a yard or two from the top of the ridge. The Sergeant crawls up and hunkers down beside me. Rifles at the ready, both of us edge up to the top. A quick glance and nothing. Then another look and I spot a body about twenty feet in front of me, slightly to the left. The Sergeant points to another body on the right. Farther away there are more brown clumps scattered about on the forest floor. Looks like about twelve in all. I look more closely. Americans. Damn! Must have been ambushed while out on patrol. Probably from the Forty-Fifth Division that we just relieved.

I crawl up to the body on my left. He's lying on his back with one leg bent over the other. Christ. Just a kid. Seventeen maybe. Round babyfaced. Poor Bastard. Probably never shaved. A lock of dark hair protrudes from under his helmet down onto his forehead. A thin blanket of snow covers his body and legs but doesn't conceal the dark red splotches on his chest and abdomen. As I look the wind picks up and sends a small cloud of snow across his face. A tiny little braid of snow separates from the rest and circles his eyelid, finally depositing itself on the cheek below. Snowflakes dance about on his face for a moment and then disappear in the forest vastness. Strangely, I feel compelled to make a decision about his hometown. For some reason, I pick Cleveland, Ohio. I move on to the next body.

It is a small, sort of delicate body. One leg is askew and rifle still clutched in both hands. The face I see is older than the first; thirtyish maybe. A face with an impeccably trimmed little mustache, clean shaven. I wonder how the hell he managed that while in combat. The eyes were open and staring up. I think there is a smile on his face. Maybe he caught a glimpse of Heaven during his last moments of life. His helmet hangs to one side of his head, almost touching his jaw. Like with the first guy, a blanket of freshly fallen snow forms a shroud over his broken body. I'll bet that the two were buddies and probably from the same hometown. Cleveland, Ohio. One possibly motivated by the perversity of youth and passion for adventure. The other, a patriot perhaps, who could have sat out the war because of his age or a fancy job but gambled it all for his country and lost. I'll bet his name was Robbie.

The next body was face down and further out. No chance for a look here. Too close to the Germans. The other G.I.s in the patrol are cautiously nosing around. Dead Americans mean living Germans. Where the hell are they? The answer comes shortly. A burst of machine gun fire off to one side. Must have spotted one of our flank men. It's a German gun. Fast rate of fire. Damn! Mortar shells should be coming in soon. It's time to get the hell out of here. No need to wait for an order from the sergeant. Another machine gun cuts in on our left. Bullets claw the air. Go legs go. The thunk! thunk! thunk! of bursting mortar shells sounds behind us. Go legs go! Go God Damn it! Go! Oh Christ! One of our guys is down. No! He's getting up. Dumb bastard must have stumbled over something.

It was pitch black when we got back to our perimeter. Freezing and exhausted, a state of depression begins to sink in. Dead or alive-what the hell's the difference. Another tomorrow just meant one more chance to catch a bullet or piece of shrapnel in some precious place. Watch it! Captain approaching. No time for pissing around. "All get back" he asks? "Yep!" responds the Sergeant. "O.K.—send your guys back for some rest. Sergeant, let's you and I have a look at the map board to see if we can figure out where those damn machine guns and mortar are located." The Sergeant gives me a look that says I'm to come along, Shit!

The discussion is short and explicit. I play no role. The last question from the Captain—"anything else to report?" "Nope" responds the Sergeant and departs. I am staggered. "Why the hell didn't you tell him about those dead G.I.s up there?" "What the hell for?" he answers. "They aren't going to do us any fu**in good when we go in there tomorrow."

He was right. Next morning artillery fire plastered the hell out of the German positions. Even before the smoke cleared, two rifle platoons including the Captain charged up the hill and shot the hell out of a few stunned Krauts. My platoon was back in reserve during the entire operation. I never even got to fire a single stinking shot.

Comment: I think the Sergeant in this story was Sergeant Malvasi. Don't remember the other guys on patrol. Probably from the Fourth Platoon.

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