

First Night in Combat

by Louis H. Shelton, 397-D

A member of Company D, 397th Infantry Regiment, Louis Shelton's military history begins with induction, ASTP, training and combat with the 100th Division and ends with returning from the Korean War in 1952. With the 100th he distinguished himself both in training and combat, rising in ranks from a private to a master sergeant also doing occupation duties in Germany.

Some stories can start at the very beginning, but for most our first night in combat is particularly vivid. We meet him in the dark woods of the Vosges Mountains foothills.

Shortly before Bob and I were to start our guard tour in this, our first combat area situation, one of the men we were to relieve came over to our tent to awaken us. We recognized that we were awake and stated that we would be at the post very quickly.

I started putting on my boots, the only thing, other than my field jacket and helmet that I had removed for the night. Bob could not lace his boots in the dark. He had to have a light. He lighted the candle that we had devised—a can of dubbing, a sealant for boot leather, with a wick.

By that time I was outside the tent. It, the tent, looked like a jack o'lantern. It was a sun-bright lantern in the dark woods. I moved back in, quickly, to advise him to cover the light.

While we were both in the tent, lighted like a lantern, we heard it.

It was a scream; prolonged and deathly. We could hear the knife turning in the kidney of a dying soldier. I slapped a hand over the candle and we were in blackness, listening to the lingering sobs of the dying soldier. He was within 30 yards of our tent. Bob finished lacing his boots in the dark.

We heard nothing more.

We got ourselves together and made our way to our post, just through to the next clearing. We relieved the two men on guard and assumed our period of responsibility. They had seen nothing, although they had heard the scream.

The moon was above the clouds, giving a visibility to shapes and shadows for perhaps 15 yards. The woods were open, of large single trees. Shadows were the predominant feature.

Bob and I looked around, aware that the enemy combat patrol was within our area. We decided that our best coverage was achieved backed up to trees facing each other. Neither of us had to have an open back. Thus, we started our first period of combat security.

Time stood still. The shadows beyond Bob's shoulder moved slowly to the left, then to the right. I had never concentrated harder, trying to separate reality from imagination. The clouds moved slowly, further confusing the real from the unreal. Concentration was focused.

I became aware that I was slipping down the trunk of the tree against which I was leaning. I refocused. Discriminate between the real shadow and the imagined movement!

I concentrated on the weeds and shadows among the trees in the clearing—nothing could be seen in the deeper woods. Time stopped. The moon drifted ever so slowly, shadows emphasizing the light play. I felt myself again slipping down the tree trunk. I realized that I was fainting from extreme concentration. I had to relax, to take things as they came. I could not protect my fellow soldiers if I was to be the first to pass out.

Once again I watched the clearing and the wood line with my peripheral vision (much clearer in clouded moonlight than direct focus.) A few minutes later I felt myself, for the third time, slipping down the tree trunk. **THIS WAS IT!** I had a serious cerebral conversation with myself.

I was anxious. I couldn't see anything. My comrades were depending on me. I was causing myself to pass out simply by concentrating on the things that I could not see. I **HAD** to realign my priorities to provide for physical action as a result of physical threat. I could not tie myself up with unseen phantoms.

Breathing deeply and evenly, although with forced control, I regained composure and control of my faculties. Referring to my watch, which had a luminous dial, I finally determined that it was time to wake our relief. Bob knew where they were and woke them.

I had made a major discovery in the understanding of the psyche of a soldier. Darkness and the unknown can be a life-threatening foe with no assistance from a physical enemy.

We retired to our tent for two hours sleep, secure in the trust of another pair of scared young men who were learning to stay alive.

Morning came too quickly. We were up and on our way shortly after dawn. We found that many people had heard the result of the enemy combat patrol in our bivouac area. The best story was that a member of Company B had had a dream in which he had been bayoneted in the back. He had lived through the attack, which we had heard, but only barely did he survive.

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