THE VILLAGE OF ST. REMY

We had spent all our time in the forests, driving the Germans back. As we moved through the woods, the enemy would often hit us with 88mm artillery fire. A tree burst would send shrapnel showering down on us. If a shell hit the ground and then exploded, the shrapnel would fly upwards and outwards, which made laying on the ground in a hollow the most protected place to be. When we were in a dugout we had the best protection except for a direct hit.

My hearing became so acute that I would dive for the ground in an instant when an artillery shell had a certain sound that said to me, "I'm going to get you this time." I could tell where it was coming from, if it was American or German, and how close it was going to hit. The one I would not hear would be the one that got me. I spent a lot of time hitting the ground, getting up, listening and hitting the ground again. Small arms fire from rifles and machine guns also got my attention and the ground was my refuge until I could tell what and where it was coming from. It became an instantaneous reflex.

On 14 November 1944, the company was attacking the German positions outside St. Remy when artillery and mortar fire came in on us. Hot, jagged shards of steel rained down on us. Some men were wounded. One piece of shrapnel struck my squad leader, Sgt. John Baud, in the back of the neck just below his helmet and he was killed almost instantly. Lapa went over to see him when he heard that he had been hit. He said that blood was all around, and there was nothing anyone could do for him. Baud, the French-American who came back to France, was the first soldier to be killed in Love Company. (He is buried in the American Military Cemetery in Epinal, where his family can visit his grave. He had just missed seeing them two weeks earlier.)

As we emerged from the woods, we crossed an open field toward the town of St. Remy, which was about a quarter mile ahead of us. We could see the church steeple as we advanced in a long skirmish line that stretched out for several hundred yards on a broad front. We continued in the face of rifle and machine gun fire. The enemy also lobbed mortar shells down on us. Some of the rounds could be seen as they descended just prior to detonation, according to Lapa, but I was not interested in looking up.

St. Remy, a small farm village in the Vosges Mountains, was the first town the company entered. There were no civilians to be seen and no Germans anywhere as we came to an intersection of two main streets in the center of town. We were wary of an enemy counterattack or house-to-house fighting. However, they had the intersection zeroed in and before we could dig in, they were shelling us with 88mm artillery fire. We scrambled for cover into the ditches at the sides of the road. Cow dung or horse manure didn't bother us when we hugged Mother Earth. What was a little more filth when you had to dive for cover to save your life?

As I was lying there I could hear, above the noise of the shelling, a voice singing:

"You'd better not laugh when the hearse goes by
For you may be the next to die.
They put you in a wooden box
And cover you over with dirt and rocks
And the worms crawl in and the worms crawl out
In through your eyes and out of your mouth.
They call their friends and their friends' friends too
And they sit on your chin and they chew and they chew.
So-o-o-o-o-o
You'd better not laugh when the hearse goes by
For you may be the next to die . . ."

Some of us threw any handy stones or rocks at the guy who was singing.

When we learned that a German forward artillery observer was directing the cannon fire from the church steeple about 100 yards up the street from us, he was put out of business very quickly and the shelling ended. It was now safe to check for any other enemy resistance, but the village was ours. We had taken our objective.

THE CLOCK TURNS BACK

We stayed a few days in St. Remy and spent some time talking with the townspeople. There were no young men there. We saw some children, some older men and a few women, both young and old.

Hound Dog (Pfc. John H. Bolin, Jr.) said that he remembered his father saying that he had been in a town called St. Remy during World War I. He and other doughboys had carved their initials in the ceiling beam of a farmhouse. It sounded sort of fantastic, but as the semiofficial interpreter of the platoon, I thought that it wouldn't hurt to ask someone, "Were there American soldiers in St. Remy during the first World War?"

One farmer became very excited when asked about it. He said, "Yes! American soldiers were here in World War I." They had even stayed in his house. He led us into his home which was divided on one side as a barn for his animals. On the other side, that was partitioned for the family, he pointed to a wooden beam about eight inches by eight inches thick with initials carved in it. The room was dimly lit, and the beam was dark brown with age and dirt. The ceiling was only about seven feet high. Hound Dog searched for his father's initials, but it was difficult to see anything even if they were there. Suddenly, he shouted, "There they are! Just the way my Dad said they would be." Then we all saw the initials: "JHB" carved exactly the way Hound Dog had described them.

Not only did Bolin come to the same town and the same house, but he was also carrying a BAR just as his father had 26 years before. It was hard to believe such a story, that a father and son would live and relive the same experience in the same place a quarter of a century apart. Most listeners would scoff at it, but the house and the initials are still there, since 1918.

In reality, this was not World War I and World War II. It was still the "Great War" as it was originally called. The 20-year intermission, 1919 to 1939, was used for the development and improvement of the weapons of war. The result was devastation beyond imagination.

Anyway, the moment called for a celebration and the farmer offered some wine, which his pretty, young daughter brought to us. I thought that it would be fun to tell the girl that Hound Dog had fallen madly in love with her and would like to marry her after the war. She said that she

might be interested, but he was too old. When I asked her, "How old do you think he is?" she replied, "Thirty-five." Actually, Bolin was 18, about six and a half feet tall, unshaven, dirty, hollow-eyed and looked beat, just like the rest of us. The budding romance never developed because, unfortunately, it was time to move out.

We headed into the woods, parallel to the road, to avoid enemy artillery spotters. It was uneventful except for the usual sounds of artillery and occasional small arms fire. As we passed through, I noticed an extended depression in front of us. It was about 10 or 12 feet wide and sloped down about two feet deep and then sloped up again to the other side. It was not an old dried out river bed. It was a World War I trench whose sides had collapsed and time had partially filled in. I thought I could hear the machine guns and cannons and dying moans of that time, but I was hearing the sounds of my time.

MORALE AT THE FRONT LINE

On 1 November 1944, the company began with six officers and 186 enlisted men, and on 18 November 1944, Love Company had five officers and 155 enlisted men.

The wounded officer was 2nd Lt. Israel N. Markfield, who was originally in an anti-aircraft unit. From the time he was assigned to our company he seemed to be uncomfortable as an infantry platoon officer. Rather than show boldness and assertiveness, he was very cautious and hesitant. His dugout was his haven where he took cover and rarely walked along the line of foxholes where the men of his platoon were posted. The sergeants of the platoon checked the men for him. It happened on 16 November 1944, that he was seriously wounded by shrapnel from an artillery shell that burst in a tree directly over his dugout. He was evacuated to a hospital and never came back to the company. That was another case of not knowing how, what or when you may be wounded or killed on the battlefront. The platoon sergeant took over and no replacement officer was assigned for quite some time.

Included with the 155 enlisted men were seven replacements. By subtracting 155 from 186 and adding the seven replacements, the number is 38 men who were killed, wounded, sick, or transferred and included three who had self-inflicted wounds. Among the enlisted men, there were certain non-combat personnel, such as the cooks, supply clerks, company clerk, and mail clerk.

The rate of turnover in the foxholes was very noticeable to those who were still there. Our morale was always high, but as the war dragged on, we changed. Our emotions and nerves were deadened, so that the sights and sounds of death and destruction were accepted with an all-encompassing numbness.

An infantry soldier, well trained or not, went into battle with a steel helmet on his head and several layers of khaki clothing as his only protection. The Germans had rifles, machine guns, mortar shells, artillery shells, grenades, bayonets, booby traps, shoe mines, antipersonnel mines, tanks, bombers, and strafing airplanes – all aimed at this woebegone dogface!

This infantryman had to be stopped before he took over your territory because you would have to fight him to get it back. If you killed him, another would take his place. He was not invincible. As he survived battle after battle, his cold determination cracked little by little as the emptiness and futility of war set in. "When will it end?" "Will the next day be my last?" "What will get me? A bullet? A chunk of shrapnel? A land mine? Will it hurt? Will it be my eyes?" Then he was broken in spirit. He felt terror. This used to be called "shell-shock." Then it was called "battle fatigue." Most infantrymen I knew didn't think about anything but coming out of the war alive. They were brave and uncomplaining and laughed at their fate.

It happened, on rare occasions, that desperation and rage overtook caution and a soldier recklessly dared to expose himself and blindly attacked the enemy. He came to the point where he wanted to end his misery, whatever the cost. Another day in the front line would drive him insane. Death was his final escape, whether in a blaze of glory or not. ("So farewell hope and, with hope, farewell fear." John Milton.)

The "million-dollar wound" was the desire of almost every dogface. Such a wound had to be severe enough to get him out of the war by sending him to a stateside hospital, but not so severe that he would be unable to live reasonably well for the rest of his life. The loss of part of an arm, hand, leg, or foot was acceptable to him. Some desperate ones had self-inflicted wounds.

There were many quiet periods on the line when both sides were sending out patrols and not attacking in force. One day, from my foxhole on the edge of a wood, I could see German foxholes across an open field – "no-man's-land." In an adjacent foxhole, there was one of my buddies waving his arm back and forth. Then I noticed a German soldier waving back at him. I was puzzled and yelled at my buddy, "Why are you waving at the German? Or is he waving at you?" He replied, "I want to get a million-dollar wound in my arm!" The plan didn't work.

It rained and snowed constantly during that winter of 1944-1945, which was reported to be the worst in 40 years in Europe. Yet there was very little weather-related sickness in the company. We were in the Vosges Mountains, in dugouts or foxholes, and never saw the inside of a house for many weeks at a time. A little pneumonia would have been a ticket back to the States, but no one seemed to get it. In fact, I don't know of anyone who had a cold, even though eyes were bleary, noses ran, and we had the

shivers. Often our teeth chattered uncontrollably, our knees trembled and we stomped our feet in the bitter cold, but somehow, we survived.

Many days the temperature sank well below freezing. In a three-man foxhole at night, one man would be on guard duty while the other two would try to get some sleep. It was one hour on guard duty and two hours off. During those off hours, the two who were trying to sleep would cuddle up under a soggy, wet Army blanket in spoon fashion for warmth. Then as the upper side that was exposed to the cold became frozen, they would reverse position in unison and warm up the cold side. This was not at all a sexy thing, though a pin-up girl or a girl of any shape or form would have been a dream come true.

When we were pulled off the front, we usually had mail waiting for us. There would be letters from home and packages of cookies or candy or some other items that the folks at home thought would be appreciated. Amazingly, our address was simply APO 447 New York and the post office was able to deliver the mail to this God-forsaken part of the world where life and death were on equal terms. The cookies and sweets my mother sent to me were homemade and delicious and usually included brownies, chocolate chip cookies, and baklava, which often arrived broken in a flimsy cake box. I seldom had more than a couple of pieces because of the vultures who stood over me and swooped in as I opened the box. I was more happy than angry to share the treats with my old buddies, and they also shared whatever they received. This was a real morale booster after all the K rations we had eaten.

In one of the earliest mail deliveries at the front, I received a letter from the girl I had met in Times Square just before we left for overseas. She wrote how much she enjoyed meeting me and that I should not forget her, especially since I was probably having a good time with all the pretty French girls over there. She asked that I write and tell her all about the wonderful experiences I was having in France. Somehow, I did not find it in my heart to answer the letter. Yet, it made me think of how so many people at home did not know anything about war, devastation and death. Pictures and newsreels could only give a sixtieth of a second's view. To live it is the only way they could understand. They were more fortunate than they knew.

While we were off the front in reserve, we had time to write letters home. Pencils were the only writing instruments available. The stationery was V-mail – a single sheet of blue paper that folded so that the message was inside and the address was outside. No postage was necessary for a

soldier. I did not have much to say in my letters – just that I am all right and do not worry. If I said anything about my location or the condition of the company Lt. Taylor would have had to censor it. None of my letters survived the war. The only one I ever found was the souvenir postcard with the picture of a German bomber.

Some soldiers in the company became sick with yellow jaundice and were sent straight back to an evacuation hospital. Why some men got it and others did not was a mystery to me, because we all had the same "haute cuisine." Yet the guys with the yellow eyeballs and sallow complexions were very happy to leave. At the hospital, they were prescribed a special diet with no fat and were assigned to a special chow line. However, some did not want to be cured and sent back to the front, so they sneaked onto the regular chow line where they could eat lots of fatty foods and prolong their stay in the hospital. If the jaundice worsened, the patient was shipped to the U.S., and if he was cured, he was usually assigned to some rear echelon unit. (Many years later, I was told that the hepatitis was transmitted by unclean hypodermic needles. If that was true, it must have happened before we were shipped overseas. We had been given shots for every known disease.)

When the company was pulled out of the front line to a rear area for rest and to clean up, it would be in a town where the Army took over civilian houses to quarter the troops. The company kitchen would be set up, and we would sleep indoors for a change – sometimes under goose down quilts. After a shower that removed a three-week layer of dirt, a shave of a three-week beard, and a change into clean clothes that we scrubbed ourselves, we felt human again.

At Moyenmoutier, we were billeted in a hotel, where each room had a heater, but there was no heat and no one felt like going out for firewood to start the heater in the room. What to do? Break up the furniture and start a fire! That's what we did. If the owner was angry, he could complain to the U.S. Army and it would pay for it.

While we were there, shots rang out from another room. It sounded like a pistol, not a rifle. In checking the source of the noise, we found one of our buddies calmly sitting in the middle of his room firing his 45 caliber pistol at mice that were scampering about the floor. After a brief warning, he stopped upsetting our rest.

In a house nearby, three of our men were trying to light a fire in the heater to warm up. By accident, the fire got out of control and the place went up in flames. The three men, Pfc. George J. Cambigue, Pfc. John M.

Hickey, and Pfc. Salvatore V. Maietta, were injured in the fire. For some reason, they were listed as AWOL in the company from 16 November 1944 to 27 November 1944, when they returned to the company. (1 March 1945, Pfc. Cambigue left L Company on sick leave. He never returned to the company. Instead, he was assigned to K Company and on 9 March 1945 was killed in action.)

On the front, we usually ate K rations and less often we had C rations which came in two small cans. One can contained a stew or hash or meat with vegetables, or spaghetti; frankfurters or pork with beans; ham and eggs with potatoes; chicken and vegetables. The other can had crackers and powders for beverages.

While in reserve, hot meals were the greatest enjoyment of all after living on K and C rations. Our cooks prepared delicious, hot meals that we enjoyed in a relaxed atmosphere without the threat of enemy bombardment. I don't know if they improved their cooking or we were just hungry for any food other than K rations.

The only thing that diminished the pleasure of standing in the chow line and getting a messkit full of roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, and a helping of peas and carrots was seeing the hungry civilians who stood around us with soulful looks eyeing the food we had. They each had a pail to collect any scraps of foods left behind from our messkits or from the chow line. It was a severe winter, and the French people living in towns near the front lines were sorely in need of food. We, as infantrymen who had nothing but our weapons and the clothes on our backs, could not do much for them, but we did give them any extra rations when we had them. The soldiers in rear echelon units were better able to help these people, because they rode in vehicles with plenty of food and equipment. Furthermore, they often were billeted in houses for days and sometimes weeks at a time and could offer much more than the dogface who was busy fighting a war out of a foxhole.

The retreating German soldiers took food, horses, chickens, eggs, and anything else they wanted from the French civilians. We felt sorry for the poor local people whose houses had been destroyed and struggled to survive. In this cold-hearted, wintry world of war, the enemy did not worry about the people they left sick and hungry. They did not have enough food for themselves, which did not make us unhappy.