

Behind the Front

by Harry Steingrubey, 399-C

Harry Steingrubey relates some of his overseas experiences outside of combat.

Luneville Prison Caper

Needless to say there was not much activity for a front line infantryman during the war other than “at the front” or “in the hospital.” There was room for some adventure in between, though. Such was the case in January 1945 while returning from the hospital to the outfit through a replacement depot in France.

A fellow GI and myself decided to accept an offer to visit a nearby town before going back to our foxholes. The offer was from a soldier with a jeep who promised to get us back by bed check. The soldier didn't show up for the return trip and left us stranded in Luneville about 65 kilometers from the depot in Strasbourg and AWOL. My companion, an Italian from New York was quite a talker and secured permits from the Military Police for overnight billets including a meal of fried chicken (first since the States) from an Air Corps ground support unit and breakfast at the Inn. No one asked for our passes—which we didn't have. My friend devised a plan to return us to the depot. He would get into an argument with the Innkeeper who would call the MP's who would discover we were without passes, hear our story, have compassion for the Infantrymen and furnish transportation back to the Depot.

As it happened, the permits we received were the last two available and the Provost Marshall had to explain to two high ranking officers seeking billets that privates had beaten them to the prize. He then is told these privates were AWOL—restitution was in order!

He had us interrogated by 1st Army, headquartered in Luneville as suspected spies (German and Italian names) and then retained in Luneville Prison's cell #22 for 48 hours with cold rations, no water, one blanket, no beds! It was 10 degrees outside with no heat. What an experience, but it was still better than a foxhole at the front.

The Nancy, France Saga Prologue

From my baptism of fire on 1 November 1944 I had been through the Vosges Mountain campaign, the Winter front and the capture of Bitche on 16 March 1945. I had spent 110 days on the front including a 40-day period of continuous service.

My nervous system had been shattered by an artillery barrage while returning to my company from a scouting engagement after the “Battle of the Baccarat Woods” in the Raon l'Etape area. My memory of events from this incident through the capture of Bitche in mid-March was seriously impaired.

Yellow Jaundice

Late in March I was diagnosed with hepatitis, or yellow jaundice, and spent the remainder of the war in hospitals, regular and convalescence in or near Nancy, France, returning to my company the day before VE Day 7 May 1945. In retrospect I considered this Divine Intervention. I doubt if I would have survived the Heilbronn, Germany battle in my state of mind.

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver. Specific treatment was not available. Rest and diet during the initial acute symptoms was mandatory after which convalescence was slow. The disease could be a killer. Two patients died from related problems during my stay at the General Hospital.

During my initial “critical” stage of the illness I was assigned to the 127th General Hospital in Nancy, managed by American medics but assisted by English speaking French nuns on the nursing staff. This had been a large well-administered Catholic hospital before the war and remained the same under our military occupancy. I was restricted to bed and temporarily the only occupant of a ward for four. My condition required round-the-clock surveillance with daily blood analysis.

Stranger in the Night

Sedated and sleeping most of the time I was not aware of time of day or another's presence until one evening with lamps out I noticed the bed across the aisle was now occupied. The light from the hall coming through the dormer over the door revealed the occupant to be male with undefined features due to the dim light. I had not realized his presence until a voice guided me to his direction. He said I had been sleeping for quite some time, as any infantryman should upon finding a good bed. Wondering how he knew I was infantry, he gave me no opportunity to question him, engaging me completely in thought provoking conversation. It was progressive and proceeded to a high intellectual level. It was pyramidal, a question answered with another question, it was becoming complex. The hours passed quickly. We neared the apex; a point where it seemed most of mankind's age-old question of "Why?" would be answered. Perhaps we were close to the final solution. It seemed that all that had been mysterious and not understood before was being explained.

At this point fear began to envelope us. Suddenly a storm announced itself with a loud thunderclap! We suggested simultaneously that perhaps we should continue our conversation at a later time. Neither of us professed the fear we had to proceed. The stranger arose, went to the window and closed the shutters against the storm suggesting we go to the "john" and then get some sleep. I had not yet been authorized to get out of bed and was unprepared for what followed.

I observed myself with the stranger walking down the hall toward the restroom! My conscious mind was not with the body; it was floating near the high ceilings, following the pair from a distance of several yards. The two were escorted back to their room by this detached being and then observed as they re-entered the body forms that still occupied the beds! All then went black and silent until early the next morning.

I was awakened by the night duty French nun who was opening the window shutters, with difficulty, wondering aloud who could have closed them on such a beautiful night, especially with me being confined to bed. I told her that my friend had closed them because of the thunderstorm and wondered where he was as the bed across from me appeared not to have been slept in. Quizzically glancing at me as she passed my bed, she said she had been on duty all night, that there had not been a storm, instead a beautiful moon had shone all night and that my friend was apparently from the same dream my storm was from. She reminded me as she left the room that I had been by myself the entire night.

Shocked by this disclosure I mused to myself a few moments later, if true, who closed the shutters? I have never convinced myself that the stranger and our conversation was but a dream. My only regret was that our conversation was interrupted by the thunder. Perhaps a few more questions answered would have appeased my philosophical yearnings or been the end of my mortal being, one thing was for sure, my unexplained experience acted as balm for my illness. My blood test the following day revealed an almost miraculous decline of the Hepatitis virus. A second test was taken for confirmation. In a few days I was removed from the critical list and moved to a convalescent hospital.

Was the stranger in the night my guardian angel or just a figment of my imagination? Perhaps I'll never know.

A Mystical Party Guest

Writing memoirs is in itself difficult, recalling events beyond fifty years of actual experience, especially of war time, which was even at the time of impact, of dream like quality.

The story I shall attempt to relate was difficult to explain at the time it happened. It was the Christmas season of 1945. A melancholy time for many soldiers like myself who had seen combat but not enough service time to go home. We were now Occupation forces, even rumors of going home were scarce. My last Christmas at home had been 1942, I had been transferred out of my parent outfit the 100th Infantry Division, away from my friends and "the girl back home," was dating and averaging but two letters a month since the war ended in August. I was DOWN! The plus side was a recent promotion to sergeant, a new friend Eugene Flux, a brilliant Hollander who had worked under Dr. Braun during the war developing the V-2 rocket for Germany, at this time working as a civilian with our regiment provost marshal and a recent assignment to extra duty as a bartender in the NCO Club. These three events added a forth, beer drinking, the Club became my second home.

Such was life in Kassel, Germany, December 1945 for me, the company clerk, Regimental Headquarters Company, 30th Infantry 3rd Division. A Christmas/New Years party was thrown for the holidays. Dress uniforms, dance band, noise makers, the works. Fraternizing with German girls was not allowed but the guests included in addition to American service women, some German girls who were employed by the military.

The merry making had reached a pleasant mixture of music, laughter and conversation when a sudden hush filled the room. A beautiful flaxen haired German girl had taken over the dance floor, literally floating in a ballerina type performance so professional it hushed all observers, she was in traditional dress.

Apparently no one had ever seen or knew the mysterious guest how had crashed our party. When the music broke I urged my Dutch friend Gene to invite her to our table. No one remembered her speaking to anyone but Gene that evening, nor was she noticed drinking, eating or using the ladies lounge. She quickly became the life of the party, spending the entire evening on the dance floor, gaily dancing with anyone who thought they could lead (or keep up) with her, of which I was one. She left as mysteriously as she entered. She simply disappeared, no one witnessed her departure. She became the subject of conversation for days. The memory of her was unforgettable.

My friend, Gene, had been especially impressed. Never the ladies man, women were seldom part of his conversation, but upon his first visit a week after the party, he could speak of no one else. He had become obsessed with her. She only had talked to him apparently and had divulged her name and address. He insisted on trying to locate her immediately. Her first name I remember was Gretchen. We went on a search mission.

Kassel had been fire-bombed during the war, most of the city lay in ruin. The German civilians were in the process of clearing the streets of debris, piling the cleaned bricks neatly along the sidewalks to be used in the rebuilding. Street names and block numbers were occasionally available from the remaining corner lamp-post. The address she had given Gene was in the heart of one of the most devastated areas.

An elderly workman was busy stacking bricks in the block her address fell. Gene feared she had deliberately mislead him, but asked the workman in German if he was familiar with the neighborhood before the bombing. He informed Gene he had lived in this area himself.

My friend was elated when the old man acknowledged Gretchen's name and description, saying he remembered her well but wondered why the inquiry. As the party incident was related the man's face registered first disbelief then astonishment, his answer instilled the same reaction in us—"Gretchen was killed during the American bombing raids—her body was never recovered!"

July 2008 Association Newsletter