

The Good Samaritan

by Harry Steingrubey, 399-C

As a Rifle Scout, much of my “At Front” time was spent between Company C on line and the 1st Battalion, 399th Regimental Headquarters, wherever they might be—in the rear. Carrying messages, passwords, bringing replacements to the front—always on the run—we were called “runners” and with good reason. We ran most of the time, not always knowing where Headquarters was or where our Company would be when we returned. Unless the front line was static, all units were constantly on the move.

A scout was on his own, skills for survival including intelligence, alertness, resourcefulness, and a good sense of direction. In the Vosges, one could become lost in a hurry. One sure way of leaving the front was to retrace your company’s battle path to their present position—through the carnage of previous days’ battles. The bloated and mutilated corpses of both sides were common sights to the scout.

Such was the case as I was proceeding to battalion one typically rainy afternoon in December 1944. Always on the alert for “not quite dead” enemy soldiers still armed and dangerous, I cautiously approached a German soldier who, lying on his back, was moaning as I neared. Coming up from behind, I quickly moved to his side—carbine ready—and nudged him gently with my boot. He was alive but gravely wounded. He was in shock and close to unconsciousness from loss of blood. He had been gutshot at close range, minimum damage at point of entry—turning him slightly over—extreme damage at point of exit. He was lying in a large pool of dried blood. His wound had congealed. I thought he could be saved but there wasn’t much time. Our medics usually checked the bodies left on the battlefield for signs of life. Had they passed him by because he was German, or had he been unconscious with the grey look of death?

As I pondered, he tried to speak and slowly moved one hand to his mouth—he was thirsty. His canteen empty, I took one from a nearby casualty. Slowly raising his head, I poured some water with the usual smell of mixed rum into his dry mouth. With the useable arm, he gestered to his jacket and repeated, “*Bild . . . Bild.*” From the inner pocket, I removed a leather billfold which contained, among other things, a small portrait of a young officer with family—wife and two children. This is what he wanted he told me with his eyes. I put his blanket roll on his stomach and placed the picture where he could see it, bracing his head up with his helmet.

He needed medical attention soon or he would never see his family again. As I was preparing to leave after giving him another drink, he muttered, “*Kamerad . . . miene Pistole . . . Sie bekommen.*” I had noticed it before—his sidearm, a German P38. He wanted me to have it as a gift before grave registration or medics removed it for a souvenir.

I complied, thanked him in German, and gestured to him that I was going for help, using basic words, with gestures, hoping he would understand. Finding the Battalion Aid Station, I informed their duty sergeant that a soldier was in urgent need of medical attention and that I would guide a stretcher-bearing team to him immediately. I didn’t tell him which Army he was in! The medics sent were not front-line regulars and one refused to aide the stricken German upon seeing his nationality. I tersely informed him he had a choice—he could take the German’s place and I would take his—or he could pick up the other end of the stretcher and we would all go back! I emphasized the remark with a pat of my carbine. He became a stretcher-bearer again quickly!

I returned with the group to ensure the German’s safe arrival. As I was leaving, the Registrar shouted to me, “The enemy you saved I.D. is Lieutenant Eric Hartmann. He muttered to me to thank you.”

Did this to some extent ease the guilt of killing three of his brethren just weeks before? A combat soldier can’t ponder this type of self questioning too often—the war he is engaged in could cease to have reason—“Ours is not to reason why. Ours is but to do and die”—someone said.

I gave the P38 to my friend, Ken Soderblow, temporarily attached to Bn HQ, for safe keeping. If taken prisoner, a German weapon found on you could be used against you!

Through the years, I have shared this story with other ex-GIs over a few beers and have often wondered if Eric Hartmann survived to live “Happily-ever-after” with the family he so much wanted to see again that bleak day so many years ago in the Vosges Mountains. I hope so.

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