

fear we might hurt his feelings otherwise, and after a trip to the latrine, we felt fairly normal again. Firm relations were cemented, however, and most of us rested serenely, unhaunted by fear of fanatical Nazis knifing us in our sleep.

Indeed, we developed such solid relations that when mine host caught me raiding his apple bins deep in the basement a few minutes before we left, early in the morning a few days later, he let me escape with the rather ridiculous explanation that I was just looking for him to thank him for his kindness and to say good-bye.

XIV. WINTER CAMPAIGN (2)

Some time during the middle of December all of us who were still privates got the news that we were promoted to private first class. Then, a few days later, we were all awarded the Combat Infantry Badge, new at that time. We scoffed at these things and

would rather have been sent home, we said. But still, they did something for morale by showing us that, though abused God knew, we were not completely ignored or forgotten.

Now another change of scene. It is New Year's Eve, and hard, cold Winter. Although from our lowly perspective we imperfectly understand what is happening, we are on a line that is stretched very thin, with no reserves and very minimal artillery support. Many units from our sector had been sent north to aid in repulsing the German attack in the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium. The night is dark, very cold, with a light snow cover over everything, and quiet. Quiet in war isn't real silence, you never cease hearing the crump of artillery near or distant, and small arms fire never really seems to stop either, but sometimes there's relative quiet. Suddenly there is an enormous crash of noise as our artillery shells go screaming over our heads, salvo after salvo. Next we hear the sounds of a firefight: mortars, machine guns, rifles. The Battalion on our right is under heavy attack! The Germans are acting crazy; they must be drunk or drugged. They're running straight at our neighbors' positions, screaming and firing as they come. Some of our people on our periphery are getting it too. Enemy losses are heavy, the attack fades away. They regroup and come on again, for more heavy losses. We listen in awe and apprehension. Then, suddenly as it started the crazy assault stops, just as the main body of our force is tensed and ready to join the fray. No one knows what it was all about. It is not until much later that I learn it was part of the beginning of German Operation *Nordwind*, a desperate attempt at an attack—that eventually proved abortive—to emulate Von Runstedt in the north. What's left of the night is quiet again where we are, but we have lost some more friends, including four of our men who were captured when their outpost was overrun by the attackers.

Another night, just before or just after the New Year attack, I don't recall precisely; conditions are very similar, at any rate. Suddenly an ungodly noise comes from the enemy side. To me it sounds like the whine and grind of my Model A Ford starting motor incredibly, unbelievably, amplified. Quickly enough we learn what it is: rockets, the first we'd ever heard of, being fired from the bed of a horse-drawn wagon. Fortunately for us, though they are being launched very close by, the target, whatever it is, is far to the rear. We can't even hear the explosions. Some days later, though, we become the targets for these insidious devices, and we take a few casualties. They are unnerving, because the explosions just happen, without forewarning. Mortars you can often hear being shot off, artillery shells make noise coming in, but with rockets, nothing—just sudden noise, concussion, and destruction. When our turn comes we are not far from the *Nordwind* attack area, but we are near a large deserted farm through which the Maginot Line runs, not very far from the border of Germany now, of course. The farm buildings are cold and empty, but we try to occupy them anyway—until we come under rocket fire and realize that we are being observed. This was the only time we received rockets, for which I was grateful. Probably at that point the Germans just didn't have enough of them available to be effective.

Those farm buildings were obviously unusable, so we tried positions around the outsides of the Maginot Line pillboxes. These offered some protection, but we had to dig in. We did not use the extensive facilities of the Line with its pillboxes and underground living areas, storage spaces, and connecting tunnels, primarily I suppose because there was no electricity. Ventilation depended upon electric power, and therefore the complex

was unusable, which was doubtless one reason why the Germans were no longer there. We did explore a little bit, but found little of interest. The Germans seemed to have used many of the floor areas as toilets before leaving. Eventually we relocated our positions away from these prime targets and dug ourselves in under some tall trees and bushes near the edge of a large open area nearby. On the other side, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, was the enemy. There we stayed for several weeks, long enough to get our holes substantially roofed with heavy logs. We called this area the “splinter factory” because of the frequency of mortar shell bursts in the trees, resulting in showers of splinters.

Here we got very familiar with mortars, since their use was the primary way we and the Germans reminded each other that we were still there. A mortar projectile is dropped, bottom down, in a tube. At the bottom of the tube is a metal protuberance that detonates a shotgun shell in the bottom of the projectile. The gunpowder in the shell provides the propulsive force, and the little bomb arches out of the tube to its target area. When you are in or near the target area, and the mortar is close enough, you can hear the shotgun shell go off. So, after the first few rounds—if you’re not hit, of course—you know how much time you have to get down. Since mortar shells explode more or less up and out, getting down is likely to be good enough, unless the hit is very close. This works until the mortar tubes are moved and re-aimed; then the timing process starts all over again—if you’re still lucky.

I was outside my hole one day attending to my diarrhea when I heard the telltale “plock” of the shotgun shell. I grabbed a nearby empty C Ration can and ducked into my hole to finish in the can what I’d started in the makeshift latrine we were using. The projectile came in on schedule, and when I looked out a moment later I saw my cold-stiffened rubberized raincoat, which I’d left behind lying on the ground, shredded with jagged shrapnel holes.

On another occasion, down the line a few holes from mine, a foxhole sustained a direct hit by a mortar round. The heavy log and dirt roof disappeared entirely, but the two occupants were unmarked. One of them, though deafened and in shock, seemed likely to recover when they carried him away—and indeed he did. The other man was dead. His death was a shock. We’d gotten used to mortar shells; at this place they hadn’t done much noticeable damage until then. All you had to do was to stay reasonably near your hole to be safe. But these guys were *in* their hole, and that was cause for a little added apprehension.

It was here that the time came that a large filling fell out of one of my teeth, resulting in a king-sized toothache. After a day or so of rather excruciating pain, I mentioned it to my sergeant, who ordered me back to Regimental headquarters, where there was a dentist. At first I was reluctant to go, since, looking around, I realized that our squad strength, normally 12, was down to four, and in the whole platoon there were barely enough of us left to make up a normal squad. However, the pain was almost unbearable, so back I had to go. There I paid my only visit to an Army dentist, and lost the only tooth I’ve ever had pulled. I was back on the line the next day, full of horror stories from the rear echelon troops about rocket and artillery shelling, which really didn’t impress me too much after a quiet night on a cot in a building, warm and dry for the first time in several weeks.

We moved on again eventually, of course, in rather deep snow for a change, and our new positions, on the crest of a lightly wooded hill overlooking a broad valley with the Germans on the other side, seemed exposed to us at first. However, we soon found that we were pretty much out of small arms and mortar fire range of one another, so it wasn't so bad. The enemy opposite us had artillery, but they were probably low on ammunition, since they only fired if we moved around in the daylight. I don't recall it harming any of us.

Without much concern for chronology, here are two more stories from my 1950s jottings that once got into the *Newsletter*.

HOTWEILER/HOTTVILLER

It was shortly after Christmas 1944, and our Battalion was moving up to the line from a reserve position we had been occupying for a few days. It was a still, bitter cold, cloudless Alsatian winter night. We had been trucked the first few miles, and now, out of the safety zone for trucks, we were making the rest of the way on foot, heavily loaded with equipment, panting, sweating, and occasionally cursing quietly. The night was illuminated by a pale half moon and the usual sporadic flashes of artillery fire some off in the distance. Except for the faint sound of explosions, occasional *sotto voce* orders from the non-coms and officers, and the sounds of our motion and continual gentle undertones of our swearing, the night was as still as death.

This was, and had been for countless years, a perennial battle zone, this borderland that was sometimes France, sometimes Germany. So there were no barking dogs or lowing cows to disturb the awful stillness. Often we caught ourselves holding our breaths, straining to hear just one natural sound, but we never did.

We had covered perhaps five miles of silent desolation in this manner when suddenly there loomed up in front of us a double row of the familiar French heavy stone houses. I felt a moment of relief. Perhaps we were not the only living beings in the world after all; here was unmistakably human habitation.

Then I was abruptly struck by a deep sense of shock and a more complete sense of desolation than before. The houses, the village was deserted, had obviously been for many years. Only the mere shells of the buildings were left. The roofs, windows, doors, everything but the stone walls had long ago been burned or rotted away. A light dusting of snow lay over everything. The cold, pale light of the moon reflected from the snow and through those empty roofs and staring window holes.

It was with a distinct sigh of relief that we passed from this human desolation on to what now seemed the more natural quiet of the poor ravaged countryside.

THE HOLE TROUBLE

[My notes say this adventure occurred in January 1945, on either Spitzberg Hill or Signalberg Hill, still in Alsace, of course.]

During January and February of 1945 our Battalion was part of the Seventh Army defensive line on northeastern France. While von Runstedt staged his counter-offensive further to the north we had advanced almost unopposed though rather conservatively and slowly, since most of our armor and heavy artillery had been sent up to help soften the Bulge.

On New Year's Eve, however, we had met and repulsed a rather vicious, but short-lived enemy counter-attack. [*This was Operation Nordwind, and it is obvious that I didn't know much about it when I wrote this. In fact, the average G.I. didn't know much about anything that was going on out of range of his own vision.*] Winter set in earnest then, so we shortened our lines and dug in to sweat it out until Spring.

The Jerries apparently did the same thing. The country being hilly and fairly wooded, was easy to defend but not suited for attacking through the snow. The Battalion was set up with two of the rifle Companies constantly on the line and the other in reserve in a nearby town four or five kilometers back. We were to shift each week so that each Company would be in one position one week, the other position the next, and in reserve the third, running patrols to see what the Krauts were doing. The first time we tried it there must have been some slip-up, for we stayed in position 22 days, sustaining two blizzards and a thaw and running our own patrols; then only three days rest.

Our hole was about seven feet square and perhaps three and a half feet deep. It was covered with a roof of logs, shelter halves, and dirt. Here three of us made our temporary home. We were situated in the middle of a line of similar holes along the top of a thinly wooded ridge. We had a clear sweep of the hill before us and way down on the other side of the valley we could make out the Kraut dugouts, about a mile away. A German machine gun spat at us occasionally, but it was so far away that one of our men it finally hit had the bullet stopped by the thickness of his overcoat. Mortar fire came in regularly, and we sent it out just as regularly, without much damage on either side, if our boys didn't have the range any better than the Jerries.

The theory was that one man was supposed to stand guard in a hole for an hour while the others slept, and to switch around during the night. On the night in question the severe cold and heavy snows of the past few weeks were over. It was stickily warm, and raining, the snow fast disappearing. Our hole got more and more uncomfortable as the day wore on. Leaks had appeared in the heretofore frozen roof, and C-Ration cans wired to the logs served but poorly to stem the tide. Then large chunks of the fast-melting earth began to fall out of the walls sporadically. Along about dark, however, with the aid of a lot of harsh talk, and not-too-clever engineering we had things in a state where we felt pretty well assured of passing a damp but fairly comfortable night.

At about 1:00 a.m. I was dozing fitfully—such conditions are never conducive to sound sleep—when suddenly I was awakened by a sound belt on the head. I was trying to figure whether we'd been hit, and if so whether or not I was wounded, when suddenly the whole roof of the foxhole, at least my side of it, suddenly settled on me, accompanied by a dull roar. Then I realized what had

happened. The melting and leaking of the day had reached their natural climax, and we had no more hole.

After mutual solicitations and inquiries disclosed that none of the three of us had been hurt, I realized that I was completely buried and unable to move. I requested to be gotten out of this, and damned fast, please. It was at this unfortunate point that the humor of the situation became manifest to my buddies, they not being buried of course. Between my loudly voiced imprecations and their laughter and indignation at being sworn at, it was a good 20 minutes before I was extricated, much ruffled but unharmed. Relations between three of us were somewhat cool for the next few hours.

XV. A REPLACEMENT

Something happened here that I wrote another short sketch about in the 1950s. This one is adapted a little for readability:

He came to us one morning on the chow Jeep. We'd been in this position for several days now, so the Jeep managed to get to us regularly at least once a day, often twice, with hot food, mail, ammunition, and—very rarely—replacements. Our Division had been on the line in and near France's Vosges Mountains since early November, 1944. At first we had moved fairly rapidly through woods and tiny villages, having frequent small but brisk firefights with slowly retreating German troops. Now it was February, and we had established a front around the first of the year near the Maginot Line that had remained static for several weeks. We exchanged desultory mortar fire with the enemy, and each side probed the other's defenses from time to time with small patrols. Snow lay deep on the ground, and it was cold.

We'd had moderately heavy casualties in our early days of combat, and casualties continued, even at a reduced rate, in our more stable position. Illness had taken its toll as well: trench foot, hepatitis, influenza, had all claimed their victims and, since replacements had been infrequently sent to us, we were down to perhaps one-