

Thoughts about Memorial Day

by Albert E. Holm, 399-D

My first recollection of Memorial Day is from May 1933. I was seven years old when my parents took my sister and me to Governor's Island, in the New York City harbor to watch real soldiers shoot real guns in salute. I picked up a brass cartridge that I treasured for many years. I remember that it was a holiday, and the family was together, even Uncle Roy, who was a soldier that told many stories about the battles in France. I always knew that Memorial Day was a holiday. In 1945, when I was an infantry soldier, I found out the true meaning of our national holiday.

I was an acting sergeant in the 399th Infantry Regiment. I was acting because I was the most experienced of those who were still alive. A front line foxhole can be a dangerous place. We were in the Vogue Mountains in mid December, just before the Battle of the Bulge.

On the day that I will always remember, I was in a front line foxhole that I picked to use because it had the best view of the battlefield. I was the front line observer for a section of four 81mm mortars. There were about fifteen to twenty feet between holes. From my position I could see Sergeant Maxwell Gregory sitting behind his 30 caliber water cooled machine gun. Max had a beautiful position. He had a "field-of-fire" that would stop any German advance. Max was a platoon sergeant. He was regular army, a drill sergeant. He helped to train all of us 18 and 19 year old kids. We all learned to respect and honor him.

It was mid morning when German artillery fire started to hit our front line position. Our experience told us that we were about to be attacked. When the shelling stopped, the attack started.

We were ready. The edge of the woods was on the far side of an open 200 yard field. A small squad of Germans, about 10 soldiers started their advance across that open field. They ran and dropped for cover. Then they rose and ran again. They tried to drop before an American soldier could aim at him. Max's machine gun spit out a burst of 'rata-tat-tat' and some rifle fire from Charlie Company. No one made it across the field.

There was a short wait before the next assault. There were twice as many soldiers in the second wave. "Rata-tat-tat" from Max's machine gun and lots of M1 rifle fire filled the air. The Germans were shooting too. They found their mark also. Soldiers were killed on both sides, but we were dug in and had more protection. But we had to get above the foxhole in order to shoot. Then we were a target too. Again the Germans mounted another assault. Again, there were twice as many men in the attack. Max kept firing. Max lost his ammunition feeder, and another soldier had to take that exposed position. Finally, the assault ended. The field was covered with dead and wounded soldiers.

Max moved back from his gun and sat down and leaned against the tree. Max started to cry. The enormity of the killing was crushing his soul. He was a broken man. A guy as tough as a sergeant was human too. Our medic, sergeant Lievi took Max back to battalion. I never saw Sergeant Max again.

Every Memorial Day, I think about Sergeant Max. I guess there are many men and women who have served their country and had similar experiences and have memories just as profound and horrible. I wonder about what Memorial Day triggers in their minds.

There have been many battles and wars before and since. It all adds up to remembering and honoring those who paid the price so we can have a holiday. We watch the parades of old soldiers and High School bands march and pay tribute to the past.

Some would say that I was lucky to have survived. I wonder who was the luckiest, those who were killed and have no memories, or those who survived and live with their memories.