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589/HQ
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"The Battle for Parker's Crossroads:
Where an American Field Artillery Battalion Died."

FOREWORD:

To Jim West

John Schaffner, a long time friend asked me to furnish you information that I had written concerning Parker's Crossroads. At the time I sent you the emailed text, I merely lifted text from the manuscript of the book I have been working on for more than 20 years. As you know, the material I sent precedes the Battle for Parker's Crossroads and ends when I finally made it back to what was left of the 589th Field Artillery Battalion at the Chateau Xhos.

At the time I sent you the text, I really did not know whether you would use my version in your web site or not. My story could well conflict with stories other veterans have submitted, although what I have written is all based upon first hand knowledge and has been reasonably researched by my friend, Staff Sergeant Francis Aspinwall who became the Battalion Historian when Major Goldstein started reforming the Battalion at the Chateau.

If you would like to see a couple of pictures of me taken in January 1945, I will try to email them to you. It was interesting for me to see the picture of Rudy Hirsch. His knick name was "Frenchie."

To answer your question, I was never a registered POW. You will note from my text I was captured by members of the 2nd SS Panzer Division, but escaped by killing a wounded German Guard as a group of us were being marched toward a German POW collection point.

I was drafted January 1943, entered the service as an inductee and assigned as a Buck Private in the 589th Field Artillery Battalion of the newly formed 106th Infantry Division at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Went overseas as a T/4 Specialist in the 589th FA Bn Fire Direction Center. January 1945, Major Elliott Goldstein promoted me to 2nd Lieutenant and I was awarded a Bronze Star for Valor at Parker's Crossroads.

In January the Department of Army decided not to re-equip the 589th and I was transferred to XVIII Airborne Corps Artillery as a Forward Observer and served with the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions in that capacity almost until the end of the war. Subsequently I was transferred to the 9th Field Artillery Battalion of the 3rd Infantry Division in the Army of Occupation. I returned home as a First Lieutenant.

I stayed in the Army Reserve while attending the University of Florida and graduated with a BS degree. Got married to a sweet Georgia Peach and accepted a management job with Southern Bell Tel & Tel in Jacksonville, Florida, in February 1949.

In 1951, our world was shattered when I was called to active duty in the US Army.

My new wife and I spent a wonderful year in the Artillery School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, while I commanded school troops and and taught Basic Artillery Classes. In 1952 our world was shattered again when I was ordered to Korea, and assigned as the Commanding Officer of Battery C, 300th Armored Field Artillery Battalion. I served in combat for almost a full year and returned home in 1953 with the rank of Captain, Field Artillery, US Army Reserve.

Jim, the rest of my book is a lengthy story of my "Love - Hate" relationship with the military, now more than 600 pages of manuscript, and still growing. I consider the small portion of the manuscript I sent you and the book title I have used "The O D Years: WWII Americana" to be under copy right. This email is your written authority the use this portion in your web site. I will be pleased and honored to become a part of your ambitious project.

The 106th Infantry Division got such a bloody nose during the early days of the Battle of the Bulge, and such terrible press concerning the surrender of two entire regiments, we guys who stood and fought would like to make our defense of Parker's Crossroads well known to historians.

Good luck with your project, I have many other types of true "War Stories" I might be able to share with you.

Sincerely -- The "OLD SARGE" Randy Pierson
03/10/2006

THE ODD YEARS: WWII AMERICANA
CHAPTER ELEVEN
FIRST COMBAT POSITION

The 589th FA Bn left the Rouen area early on the morning of 7 December 1944. The 422nd Regimental Combat Team, which included the 589th, then motored in convoy to a bivouac area near Roselle, Belgium. Enroute to Roselle, we witnessed the first evidence of war since leaving the port of LeHarve. During this portion of the trip we observed a landscape pitted with enormous bomb craters and substantial numbers of damaged motorized and horse-drawn German vehicles. The fact the invincible armies of the Third Reich were still using horse-drawn equipment was surprising to me.

The mood of the men in my unit became more somber as the cold and wet weather began to take its toll and the expectation of combat began to dominate our thinking. We rode steadily into the unknown, each man engrossed in his own thoughts, and enduring his own personal misery in silence.

The convoy reached the Belgian town of St. Vith the afternoon of 8 December 1944. This town was an important communications and transportation hub for both North-South and East-West traffic. Our Division, the 106th Infantry Division, ultimately chose this town as the location for its forward headquarters because it was located approximately in the center of the area the 106th Infantry Division was assigned to defend.

The men of the 589th FA Bn parked our vehicles on the side of a hill just north of town, ate a meal, then we waited for the return of our Commanding Officer, Lieutenant

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Colonel Thomas P. Kelly, Jr., who had gone to Division Artillery Headquarters to receive our latest orders. As ordered, we moved into a bivouac area near the village of Wallerode to service the vehicles and to spend the night. The weather was extremely cold and the snow quite deep. Sounds of distant artillery fire and the bright light of their muzzle flashes occasionally broke the stillness of the night.

The final leg of our journey to the front lines was completed on 9 December 1944. That day the 589th FA Bn relieved the 15th FA Bn of the veteran 2nd Infantry Division in defensive positions some two miles south of Auw, Germany.

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By 10 December 1944 the 422nd Infantry Regiment had established its defensive front, and was occupying pill boxes on the western side of the German Siegfried Line and all of the territory west of these fortifications. The Germans were securely dug-in and occupying fortifications about three miles east of the American forces. This created a type of no-man's land in the buffer area between the two forces.

The 422nd had several problems to cope with however. First, the front of their fortifications were facing in the wrong direction, with the rear, instead of the front, facing the enemy. Second, the Main Supply Route (MSR), over which the 422nd Infantry Regiment received supplies could not be considered an all-weather road, and Third, the Regimental front was so wide, and the infantry defenders spread so thin, this front could not be held against any type of determined attack.

As ordered, the 589th took over the positions of the 15th FA Bn, lock, stock, and barrel. We even left our new 105mm howitzers in the bivouac area for the withdrawing

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15th FA Bn, and took over the worn 105s left by the 15th FA Bn. We were ordered to occupy their dugouts, howitzer positions, command posts, and observation posts, with no changes. The 2nd Infantry Division veterans advised us this was an inactive sector and we would gradually acquire our combat experience during the severe winter months. Being new to combat, we were grateful for this information, and immediately set about the business of establishing ourselves as an effective Field Artillery Battalion.

Even though we felt confident of our ability to provide effective support for the 422nd, and felt comfortable with the infantry between us and the enemy, the 589th had it's own problems. First, the 15th FA Bn had been in position long enough to improve the living accommodations for the howitzer crews, but the howitzer emplacements themselves were poorly designed, and did not contain the space necessary to shift the position of a howitzer so it could cover the entire width of the Regimental area of responsibility. This fact restricted the ability of our Artillery Battalion to mass all 12 howitzers on a single target in a reasonable period of time. Second, the firing batteries discovered, almost too late, their 2 1/2 ton prime movers could not reach the gun emplacements, making it almost impossible to withdraw the howitzers without a Herculean effort from the Cannoneers themselves. And Third, the left flank of the Battalion was not protected by the 422nd Infantry Regiment, but was inadequately defended, if defended at all, by a thinly spread Reconnaissance Squadron. This meant any enemy break-through to out north could quickly deny us the ability to withdraw the Battalion..

The 589th Battalion Command Post (CP) was located in a relatively large stone

and timbered German farm house. The CP housed the senior battalion officers; Lieutenant Colonel Kelly, and Majors Goldstein and Parker, the Fire Direction Center and Message Center, plus the enlisted personnel necessary to man these centers 24 hours per day. Once ensconced in this building, I realized how lucky I was to be a fire control technician. The farm house was almost as sturdy as a pill box, and the ground floor was heated with a wood burning stove which also served as a cook stove. These were very comfortable quarters compared to being in a howitzer section, or in a communications crew, whose members were outside in the inclement weather a majority of the time.

Initially, as predicted, this sector turned out to be relatively inactive. Both American and German activity was mainly confined to infantry patrols, and small arms fire fights. The artillery action consisted of normal interdiction and harassing missions, with occasional missions fired by artillery forward observers upon targets of opportunity. By the time we had been in this position for three days, life had developed into a routine.

Several miles east of out Command Post, the Germans had installed 'Buzz Bomb' launching ramps. These German V2 rockets contained a ton of explosives, flew on short stubby wings, had a normal aircraft tail assembly, and were powered by a ram-jet engine. These flying bombs, which flew directly over our position at a very low altitude, were on their way to targets in Liege and/or Brussels, Belgium. The ram-jet engine made a sound similar to a four cylinder engine, running on two cylinders. The sound of these engines was very distinctive!

During the evening hours we could safely watch the light of the hot exhaust gasses from these engines as the bombs passed overhead. Off in the distance we often

watched lines of lazy tracers trails from quad, 50-caliber machine guns valiantly trying to intercept the V2s as anti-aircraft batteries tried to explode the bombs before they reached their intended target. Occasionally we would witness a huge explosion when a bomb was hit. We would actually applaud when we viewed this spectacular sight.

After witnessing this sight for several nights some 589th machine gunners decided to join the war effort and planned to shot down a 'Buzz Bomb' as it passed over our position. Several 50-caliber machine guns were mounted at strategic locations in the area, and bets were placed on which machine gun crew would 'Pop' the first 'Buzz Bomb.' The gunners were right, the task turned out to be fairly simple. They 'Popped' the third 'Buzz Bomb' which flew above our position. However, no one had anticipated the disastrous effect caused by one ton of high-explosives being detonated about 600 or 700 yards above our heads.

The explosion caused several fatalities in a heard of milk cows grazing directly underneath the violent explosion. One heavily loaded supply truck was blown off of the road and onto it's side. The poor driver, badly dazed, was yelling he had his million dollar wound, and was going home. Several of the men from the 589th received headaches and experienced ringing in their ears from the explosion. Many guys thought we had been bombed, but those who knew the facts would not identify the perpetrator.

During the aftermath of this self-made disaster, no machine gun crew would take credit for the 'kill,' therefore all bets were cancelled.

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On the afternoon of 15 December 1944, after I was relieved from my duties in

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the Fire Direction Center, I called Sergeant Alford at "A" Battery and invited myself over for a drink. When I arrived, Barney and his off-duty crew were sipping Cognac and had a low-stakes poker game under way. Their living bunker was warm from body heat and the heat from a small GI cooking stove. Everyone was in good spirits. Barney dropped out of the game and he and I lounged on a couple of built-in bunks, sipped Cognac straight from the bottle, and talked about the University of Florida and what we would do when the war was over.

While trudging through the knee-deep snow on the way back to the Command Post, I thanked the kind angel who guided me into the Field Artillery instead of the Infantry. Living outdoors in this weather would be impossible. When I reached the CP, I stuck my head into the Fire Direction Center and told Staff Sergeant Frank Tacker I was going to turn in for the night. Frank nodded and said he would have someone get me out of the sack in time for breakfast.

I partially undressed in the unheated attic of the farm house and slipped into my bed roll. In the silence of the attic, I could faintly hear the sounds of war in the far off distance. Not knowing what would happen tomorrow, I thanked my Heavenly Father for keeping me out of harm's way, and then fell fast asleep.

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THE OD YEARS: WWII AMERICANA
CHAPTER TWELVE
THE ARDENNES OFFENSIVE - Day 1

At 0540 hours on 16 December 1944 dim flashes of lightening mixed with distant rolls of thunder awakened me from a shallow sleep. I had a strong urge to urinate but tried to fight it off. A trip to the latrine, outside the building, in the cold and deep snow did not appeal to me. The unheated attic where I slept was cold, but my bed roll was snug and warm. I looked at my watch, the GI luminous dial indicated 0540 hours. My shift in the Fire Direction Center did not start until 0700. Trusting my bladder would hold until then, I quickly went back to sleep.

Ten minutes later, Lieutenant Clausen, the Battalion Survey Officer, opened the attic door, looked in, and laughed. He witnessed eight enlisted men, dressed in long johns, long woolen socks, and woolen skull caps, sleeping on the attic floor in bed rolls. He then yelled, "Sergeant Pierson, drop your cock and grab your socks, we need you in Fire Direction." For emphasis, he added with authority, "RIGHT NOW" as he left the room.

Getting dressed in a hurry in the cold is easy. You learned quickly to keep your outer garments close at hand. In about three minutes , fully clothed, I made my way from the dark attic through the kitchen and down the cellar stairs. The double woolen blanked, used to black-out the cellar door, parted and Lieutenant Clausen motioned me into the CP. Slightly peeved, I said, "Lieutenant, if you don't mind, I have to take a leak."

The Lieutenant grinned, and with typical army humor, told me, "OK Sergeant, hurry up and take a leak, but only shake your pecker once. Shaking it more than one time is playing with it, and we don't have time for you to play with your pecker!"

Outside the building my eyes readjusted to the dark. At the enlisted men's latrine I started to void my bladder. The thunder and lightening flashes were north and east of our position. They seemed to be getting louder and brighter. Back home in Florida, flashes and thunder like this were common in the early morning hours.

Suddenly it dawned on me, this was not a Florida early morning thunder storm. This is Germany and this is combat. I was witnessing a heavy artillery barrage, several miles away, and thought, "Somebody north of us is catching Hell. I wish them no bad luck, but I'm damned glad it is them and not us."

Standing in the deep snow, astride the latrine slit trench, I obeyed the Lieutenant's order and proceeded to urinate and "Shake my pecker only once." Before I zipped the fly on my pants closed, I heard the unmistakable 'Woosh - Woosh - Woosh' of an incoming artillery shell. Promptly, I fell to the ground and heard the Command Post guard screaming at the top of his voice, "INCOMING MAIL!"

The loud noise and violent concussion of the nearby exploding shell froze me with terror in the total darkness. The 'Whir -r -r -r' of shell fragments flying through the air sounded like the flight of huge insects, while chucks of ice and frozen earth raining down upon my prone body intensified my fears. Stunned, shaking and with my heart racing, I lay there waiting for more shells to explode. I did not move until Lieutenant Clausen emerged from the farm house to check on the CP guard and yelled, "Sergeant

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Pierson, are you OK?"

"Yes Sir."

"Well get your ass back in this building - Pronto!"

We had occupied this position for six days with almost no action, and frankly, expected none. Our mission was simple, hold this ground until the Allies mounted their spring offensive. Then we would head for Berlin!

As I entered the Command Post, the outside cold and darkness changed to warmth and light. This change was welcome! Still shaken, although not hurt, I noticed the CP was full. The Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas P. Kelly, Jr. was talking to Division Artillery on the telephone and had a stern look on his face. Major Arthur C. Parker, III, the Battalion Plans and Operations Officer (S3), was plotting information on the situation map as Captain Joe Cox, the Battalion Intelligence Officer (S2), relayed information to the Major as he received it over the telephone from the Division Intelligence Officer. Only Lieutenant Clausen seemed calm and relaxed when he asked me, "Sergeant, did you shake your pecker more than once?"

Being the junior officer in battalion headquarters, he was much closer to the enlisted men than the older, more senior, officers. As a result, all of the non-commissioned officers, such as myself, liked him and confided in him. He was a good officer! I was in the process of telling him I was so scared, when I heard the incoming artillery shell, I forgot to shake my pecker at all, when Staff Sergeant Frank Tacker interrupted us. Tacker was in telephone contact with all three firing batteries and they were reporting many incoming rounds exploding in their battery positions. I immediately

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thought of "A" Battery and my buddy, Sergeant Barney Alford.

Lieutenant Clausen left us and informed both Captain Cox and Major Parker of the artillery attack on our positions. The Major immediately relayed this information to Division Artillery. Information was now beginning to flow!

Frank Tacker, the Intelligence Sergeant, motioned for me to move into the portion of the cellar designated as the Fire Direction Center. Once away from the intense senior officers I asked Tacker what was going on. He did not know many facts, only rumors. First rumor: Jerry had accumulated some excess ammunition and was just raising hell in our sector. Second rumor: A large scale German offensive was going to follow the heavy artillery barrage now underway in our sector. Conclusion - take your pick.

About 0630 hours we received our first fire mission of the day from 'Hotshot 1,' one of our forward observers up front with the 422nd Infantry Regiment. 'Hotshot 1' was excited! He reported no visibility due to fog, but infantry listening posts were reporting sounds of running motors and moving tracked vehicles at various locations along the entire Regimental front. He also reported a heavy, repeat heavy, artillery barrages impacting the entire 422nd Regimental front. Hotshot 1 requested unobserved fire immediately on eight pre-selected targets suspected of being German assembly and staging areas.

Before Hotshot 1 finished his requests for artillery support, Major Parker interrupted and told us in Fire Direction to, "Give him what he needs," and went back to confer with the Battalion Intelligence officer.

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Lieutenant Clausen, now acting as the fire direction officer, took the phone from Staff Sergeant Tacker, told us to alert the firing batteries, and tried to get more information from the forward observer, Hotshot 1. Frank Tacker and I alerted the three firing batteries of multiple fire missions ahead and began to send fire commands: "Elevation 1390, Deflection 067, 1 Round, Charge 5, Shell High Explosive, Fuse Quick, Battery Right at Ten Second Intervals - Fire When Ready!"

Fifty one seconds later "A" Battery reported, "First Round on the Way," quickly followed by reports from "B" and "C" Batteries. Lieutenant Clausen reported "On the Way" to Hotshot 1 and continued to pump him for current information. Tacker and I were pleased with the firing batteries fast response-time to the first fire mission and Tacker commented, "A Battery got off the first round again," and half thinking out loud added, "Of course they usually do."

These first six fire missions, started the battle that Americans later called the 'Battle of the Bulge,' and the Germans referred to as their 'Ardennes Offensive.' The 589th delivered 72 rounds of 105mm high explosive shells with fuses set to detonate upon impact. Twelve rounds struck each of the six enemy target areas at 10 second intervals. This mission lasted about 10 minutes, from the beginning until the last firing battery reported, "Mission Complete." The Executive Officers of all three firing batteries reported sporadic incoming artillery rounds and asked Lieutenant Clausen if any of the battalion forward observers could spot the enemy artillery flashes and direct counter battery fire against the German artillery positions. All artillery forward observers reported negative. Vision was still impossible due to darkness and fog.

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Hotshot 1 reported the sounds of moving tracked vehicles had diminished as the result of our first interdiction fire. With this information now available, Major Parker and Lieutenant Clausen studied battle maps and began preparing firing data for additional interdiction and harassing artillery fire in support of the infantry.

Tacker continued to talk with Hotshot 1 and the picture of the situation in front of the 422nd Infantry Regiment started to clear. The enemy artillery barrage had lifted in this sector and German infantry, heavily supported with armor, was probing outpost

positions of the 422nd in earnest. German artillery fire, which had softened up the infantry, was now starting to concentrate upon the three firing batteries of the 589th Field Artillery Battalion. In fact, the firing batteries were now on the telephone reporting heavy enemy artillery fire landing in their positions.

Suddenly, about 0700, the conversation with Hotshot 1 was interrupted. The telephone line had been shot away, or cut by the advancing German infantry. We, of course, did not know which. The 589th switchboard operator reported the line completely dead. Frantically we changed to radio communications and finally made contact again with our forward observers. Hotshot 1 advised us the infantry outposts had been overrun and the main line of resistance (MLR) was beginning to crumble. He said he had been ordered back to Infantry Regiment Headquarters and would reestablish radio contact with us when he arrived there.

I never saw or heard from Hotshot 1 again!

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By 0800 hours of the first day of the Battle of the Bulge, devastating German

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artillery fire had completely destroyed our forward telephone lines and the German signalmen were expertly jamming the radio frequencies we used to communicate with the infantry. We felt helpless and frustrated, we could no longer support our infantry! Lieutenant Colonel Kelly ordered Captain Beans, the Battalion Communications Officer, to take wire crews forward to locate and repair the damaged telephone wire net. Captain Beans, a huge man from Texas, did not blink an eye when he saluted the Battalion Commander and said, "Yes Sir," and hurriedly left the Command Post. A few hours later I witnessed the body of Captain Beans sprawled across the hood of his shot-up jeep, the driver trying desperately to get the bloody and badly mangled body of this brave Captain to the Battalion Aid Station.

This was the last time I saw Captain Alva R. Beans. Almost fifty years later, I learned Captain Beans ultimately survived his heinous wounds but was never returned to battle.

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Communications were now limited to Division Artillery located in St. Vith, Belgium. Brigadier General McMahon, the Division Artillery Commander in St. Vith painted a dreary picture of the tactical situation to Lieutenant Colonel Kelly. A German panzer unit had breached the American lines to the north of the 589th FA Bn position. The breach was between the 14th Cavalry Group and the north flank of the 422nd Infantry Regiment. The 14th Cavalry Group was withdrawing under the weight of the enemy advance. The 422nd Infantry east of the 589th, was holding, but was defending itself on three sides, and could become completely surrounded within a matter of hours.

How did this affect the 589th Field Artillery Battalion? General McMahon advised Lieutenant Colonel Kelly that German armor, reinforced by armored infantry, would probably converge on the 589th howitzer positions from the north and east by 1400 hours. His specific orders were not firm at this time. For now, he suggested the 589th should prepare to defend itself in place. But, he added, also prepare to withdraw, under attack, utilizing elements of the 422nd Infantry that might fall back through the existing 589th artillery positions.

After talking with General McMahon, the Colonel immediately started to confer with his Executive Officer, Major Elliott Goldstein and his S-3, Major Parker.

The first decision was to close the Fire Direction Center as it could no longer be used in this situation. Major Parker ordered Staff Sergeant Tacker to, 'Close Station' for all but a skeleton Command Post crew and to prepare to withdraw to a farmhouse some 2,000 yards to the west of our current position. This location had been previously reconnoitered by our Executive Officer, Major Goldstein and had been previously designated as 'CP Rear.' Within minutes, off duty personnel had been mobilized to pack and load communications and fire direction equipment, plus personal gear into the Command Post 2 1/2 ton GMC truck. The Command Post 3/4 ton Dodge truck was left empty to accommodate remaining equipment and the skeleton CP crew.

This task completed, Tacker and the majority of the CP crew departed to the CP Rear to establish a new Command Post and a communications network connecting to the new firing battery positions and Division Artillery in St. Vith.

The second decision was based upon the premise that the Battalion would be

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attacked from the north and/or the ease in a matter of hours. "B" Battery, being the center battery in the present location was not in a good position to defend itself from either direction. Consequently the Commanding Officer of "B" Battery was ordered to 'Close Station - March Order' and immediately began to withdraw to the alternate firing battery position designated 'Baker Rear.' Once emplaced, "B" Battery would be in a position to support the subsequent withdrawal of "A" and "C" Batteries, plus the remainder of Headquarters Battery. Major Goldstein was assigned the responsibility of commanding all personnel at the rear positions, plus relocating Service Battery, and designating a new supply route from Service Battery to the new Battalion CP.

The third decision was to turn the four howitzers of "C" Battery to face more northerly. "A" Battery required only minor adjustments to accomplish it's new mission at this time as it already covered the terrain to the east of our first position.

These decisions all proved to be rational based upon the information available to us. For instance, new reports received from Division Headquarters established the fact that both enemy armor and infantry had entered the town of Auw, Germany, which was located less than two miles north of us. There, the enemy was battering the exposed left flank of the vastly out-manned and out-gunned 422nd Infantry Regiment. To enable "C" Battery to provide effective fire in the direction of Auw, an observation post had to be established on the road which ran northward toward Auw. Major Parker called the "C" Battery Commander and advised him to position his four howitzers so they could provide indirect fire support to our infantry as they fought in, or were displaced from, Auw. It was also necessary for "C" Battery to be able to provide direct fire upon the Auw road in

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defense of his battery position against a direct infantry and/or an armored assault. The Major also advised him Lieutenant Clausen and a forward observation crew would contact him by radio once the "C" Battery forward observation post overlooking the Auw road was established.

As Lieutenant Clausen and his driver, a good friend of mine, Guy D. Smith, Jr. from Texas, prepared to leave on the trip to the new observation post I advised them both to take care, and waved good-bye as they left in their loaded-down jeep.

At the time, I did not know I would never see either of my friends again!

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After addressing the reality of an attack from Auw, north of us, time was then spent debating the possibility of an attack from the direction of Prum, Germany which was located some twelve miles east of our current position and was a known marshaling yard for German soldiers and equipment. The potential threat from the east forced some minor changes in the mission initially assigned to "A" Battery. The new defensive plan for "A" Battery involved leaving the 3rd and 4th howitzer sections, on the right flank of the battery, in place to deliver indirect fire to the east toward Prum. The left platoon of the battery would be split and the and re-emplaced. The 2nd howitzer section would be placed to cover the wooded area directly east of the battalion to protect against an infantry assault from that direction. The 1st howitzer section, commanded by my ole buddy from Florida, Sergeant Barney Alford, would be placed to cover the road leading eastward toward Prum. Any armored attack from the direction of Prum would be confined to the road itself because of serious icing and deep snow conditions. Also, the

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trees in this portion of the Ardennes Forest were so thick, Panzers could not leave the road.

Major Parker called Captain Menke, CO of "A" Battery and caught him in his command bunker. When Captain Menke was summoned to the phone he answered, "Good morning Major," and asked the question, "What in the hell is going on?"

"We don't know yet Captain, but Division Artillery thinks the 422nd Infantry will ultimately be surrounded. We are in a vulnerable position, sitting here behind them. Do you remember any of your old infantry training?"

"No I don't Major, I thought we were in the Field Artillery. You know, 'and those Caissons go rolling along,' and all that stuff."

The Major continued, "I have ordered "B" Battery to withdraw to 'Baker Rear' to cover the rest of the battalion if we have to withdraw also. The Colonel has also established a 'Command Post Rear' and placed Major Goldstein in command there. We've turned "C" Battery to face north to defend against an expected attack from Auw. I want you to leave your right platoon as is. Emplace one of your howitzers to cover our eastern side to defend against infantry infiltrating through the forest, and relocate your remaining howitzer section to cover the road from Prum with direct fire. If we encounter penetration through the 422nd Infantry, anti-tank fire will be required to defend against the approaching Panzers on that road. I'll be over in a few minutes and we will make a decision on the anti-tank position. Captain, do you have any questions?"

"Can't think of any right now Major. You have given me an idea of what we have to do. When you are ready, come to my command bunker, I'm certain I will have

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questions by then, we can discuss them over a cup of hot coffee."

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Frank Tacker and I were busy closing down the Fire Direction Center when Lieutenant Colonel Kelly called for me. I walked over to the Command Post side of the cellar where Lieutenant Colonel Kelly and Major Parker were looking at the situation map which was still mounted on the wall. The Colonel asked me a very direct question, "Sergeant Pierson do you understand what we are trying to do?"

"Partially, sir."

Major Parker broke into the conversation and pointed to the newly updated situation map and then he said, "There is one missing piece," and inserted one more pin

into the map. The location was east of the battalion and on the north side of the road leading to Prum. "We need an observation and listening post here." As I nodded my head in the affirmative, he asked, "Think you can handle it?"

This question caught me by surprise. I had assumed I would be going back to help establish the 'Command Post Rear.' I looked squarely at Major Parker, but got no response. After regaining my composure, I replied in a very unmilitary manner, "Sure, why not?"

"I know you can! We need eyes and ears on the east side of us. We expect infantry from the 422nd to be withdrawing toward us on the Prum road soon. We also think they may be followed closely by German Panzers and infantry. The idea is for us to let our folks through, but slow down, or stop, the following enemy. I want you to take a radio operator and a couple of men and establish an observation and listening post at the

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location indicated by this pin in the map. Think you can find it?"

It was clear to me the pin in the map was on the south side of a hill overlooking a deep and narrow cut where the Prum road ran through the hill. I looked at the Operations Officer and answered, "Yes Sir."

Lieutenant Colonel Kelly, an expert reader of maps, asked me a check question, "What terrain features do you see on the map that will indicate you are in the right location?"

The thought occurred to me, "Once a teacher, always a teacher." The Colonel was testing me now just as he had tested me during winter maneuvers in Tennessee and while we trained at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. In detail I explained to the Colonel how I would recognize the right location when my party reached it.

Apparently satisfied I knew how to find the proper location, the Colonel told me to get going as I had no time to waste. He added, "Sergeant, check in by radio when you get situated. Also, keep in mind, this is not a combat position, I need information. Stay under cover as much as possible, and remember, I need current information." His last statement to me was, "If, for some reason, you get separated from the unit, get your men back to Command Post Rear. If you find no one there, make your way south and west to Division Headquarters in St. Vith."

At the time I did not know it, but these were the last instructions I would ever receive from my respected Battalion Commander. After putting WWII experiences behind for many years, I joined the 106th Infantry Division Association in the late 1980s. To my surprise, I learned that Colonel Kelly had survived WWII and had returned to his

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law practice in Tampa, Florida. Through telephone and mail contacts I was privileged to contribute to his published book, THE FIGHTIN' 589th.

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As I left the Command Post I told Private First Class "Brownie" Brown to dress warm, bring his carbine, a few extra clips of ammunition, a portable radio, and follow me. Outside I found Private First Class Jim Lemley and gave him the same instructions.

On foot, the three of us crossed the Prum road and entered the thick forest for cover. We turned east and walked parallel to the road. As we approached the rear of the "A" Battery position, an extremely nervous guard yelled, "HALT! Who Goes There?"

This challenge sounded so out of place I almost laughed, but when I heard a rifle bolt click and slam a round into the chamber, I yelled, "This is Sergeant Pierson and two guys from Headquarters Battery."

A cautions voice responded, "I don't know any Sergeant Pierson from Headquarters Battery."

Getting a little testy, I yelled back, "Well I don't know you either! Put the fucking gun down, we have to come through the "A" Battery position."

"Who told you to come through "A" Battery?"

"Colonel Kelly, you shit head."

"How do I know Colonel Kelly told you to come through "A" Battery? Do you know anybody in "A" Battery?"

"I'll answer both questions. You don't, and yes I do."

"Who do you know in "A" Battery?"

"That's enough of this bull shit! We are up to our ass in snow, we are cold, and we have to get through. Call Barney Alford and tell him Randy wants to talk with him."

"Do you know Sergeant Alford?"

"Yes he is from Pensacola, Florida, he chews tobacco, and he spits a lot."

"Yep, you know him. OK, come on through."

The walk out of the forest and through the "A" Battery position was much easier than breaking a new trail through the deep snow in the woods. On the way through "A" Battery we found Barney and Corporal Fairchild, the Battalion Artillery Mechanic, working on Barney's howitzer. Under the circumstances, the meeting was friendly, but brief.

"Well, as I live and breathe, this must be the lovable, tobacco chewing, and Cognac drinking, Sergeant Alford, the pride of "A" Battery. How are you doing Barney?"

"You lost? You Headquarters Battery, 24 carat, goldbrick. What in the hell are you doing in a firing battery? If you hang around here long enough, I'll get some work out of your skinny ass. We have to move this howitzer out to the road and set it up for direct fire, you know, like an anti-tank gun."

"I know, I heard Major Parker talking to Captain Menke about your assignment."

"Randy, what good will my 105 be out there on the road. In this fog, we can't see more than a couple of hundred yards."

"That's one thing we need to talk about Barney. I'm on my way to setup a listening post about a thousand yards down the road. We'll be located to the left of the

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road and about twenty yards up the hill that overlooks it. If you have to fire direct fire in that direction, for Christ's sake don't shoot to the left of the road. We won't be dug-in and we certainly don't want to get clobbered by fire from 'A' Battery."

"It's a good thing you told me where you are going. Damn, we could wipe you out by accident and you know we don't want to do that."

"Barney, you're one of the few firing battery idiots I trust. That's why we detoured by here to talk to you. I want a responsible person to know where we are."

"Who is with you, ole buddy?"

"Brown and Lemley."

"That's all?"

"Yea, they were the only guys I could find that were not nailed down."

"Randy, I think you could use some help. Could you use Corporal Fairchild?"

"I could use another man. I'd feel better with one more man in case something goes wrong. But Barney, Fairchild is from Service Battery, he would have to volunteer, I can't order him to come with us."

"Hold on a minute Randy." Sergeant Alford called Corporal Fairchild over and explained the situation. After several questions, Charlie Fairchild nodded his head and Barney introduced us. "Charlie, do you know Sergeant Pierson?"

"I don't really know him, but I know who he is. Is he a friend of yours Sergeant Alford?"

Without hesitation, Sergeant Alford emphasized, "Yes, he is a damned good friend. He has his tail in a crack and needs someone with common sense to help him."

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The three of us, two Sergeants and one Corporal, the people who face the enemy and fight the skirmishes, decided the detail would take a bazooka, even though we were not expected to defend the listening post. As Barney and I talked about good times in sunny Florida, Charlie Fairchild went in search of a bazooka and ammunition.

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Our observation and listening post was no more than a dot on a battle map. It was positioned to cover an east/west secondary road which connected Prum, Germany with a main north/south highway to our rear. This main highway connected St. Vith and Liege, Belgium. Our prime problem was visibility, we heard tank engines, but could not see them. We had almost zero visibility, a complete white-out. No earth, no sky, no trees, and no road. Nothing but pure white snow merging with dense white fog.

The four of us sat on our heels and waited on the south slope of a steep hill in the Ardennes Forest. The temperature hovered near twelve degrees and in a crouched position the snow was chest deep. The cold and the snow were both a curse and a blessing. Frigid cold numbed our senses, cracked our lips until they bled, pained our feet and fingers, and froze our carbines so they would not fire. The deep snow, however, hid us from the oncoming Germans, offered some protection from the merciless cold wind, and, being twenty degrees warmer than the air, tempered the penetrating cold somewhat.

Private First Class Brown whispered, "TANKS! I hear tanks moving Sergeant Pierson. The sounds are getting louder. They are coming our way! What should we do?"

My answer did not require much thought, "Brownie, fire up the radio and notify

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Colonel Kelly at Battalion Headquarters."

The creaking, clanking steel treads on frozen ground, combined with the undulating roar of the powerful and un-muffled engines indicated the oncoming vehicles were Panzers. American M4 Sherman tanks made a much different sound.

This fact posed more questions than answers. How many Panzers were there? How close were they? But more important to us, were they supported by infantry, or were they merely a motorized reconnaissance patrol assigned to make contact with the American main line of resistance? Despite the harsh weather and unanswered questions, the steadily advancing German Panzers were our immediate concern.

The temporary listening post was not defensible. I moved Private First Class Lemley one hundred yards east along the hill to warn us if infantry was advancing with the Panzers. I sent Private First Class Brown to the top of the hill behind us, to maintain radio contact with Battalion, and to alert us if enemy infantry approached from the

rear. Corporal Fairchild and I remained in place. We assembled and loaded the 2.36 inch anti-tank bazooka, just in case.

The activity involved in getting ready for the frightening events to come calmed our frayed nerves. My natural instincts told me to get up and run, to bug-out, but my orders were to stay, listen, and report. Consequently, I stayed busy until the ground around me shook and the roar of powerful motors was deafening. Then I looked.

About thirty feet beneath us, and two hundred yards to the east, the white fog gave way to a mammoth, dirty gray monster festooned with contrasting black crosses highlighted with white backgrounds. The lead tank commander, in a Mk V Panther, was

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leaning out of the open hatch, eyes glued to the ground, issuing directions in German to the driver, desperately trying to keep his mechanical behemoth out of the ditch and on the ice-glazed road.

Suddenly I felt the bazooka resting on my shoulder and Corporal Fairchild tapping me on the helmet, the signal that the bazooka was ready to fire and he was out of the way of the back-blast from the weapon. Fairchild spoke, with his soft southern drawl, "She is loaded and locked. The sight is set for one hundred yards. Wait until the Panzer gets in range, Sarge. It will be like shooting a fish in a rain barrel."

Oblivious to the Colonel's instructions that this was not a combat mission, I aimed, and when the Panzer was what I judged to be one hundred yards away, I squeezed the trigger. The bazooka belched flames and gently kicked the side of my helmet. My eyes followed the flight of the projectile straight to the target. WHAM! A large explosion, a big flash, and the smell of acrid smoke. A direct hit!

Instantly the German tank commander dropped from sight and the hatch cover slammed shut. The Panther continued moving toward us, it's giant turret and 75mm cannon rotating to the right in our direction. The bazooka round was ineffective. It did not even scratch the hard metal armor plate of the oncoming Panther. Kneeling there bewildered, I silently watched the action below. Suddenly I felt a tugging on the bazooka and the now familiar tap on the helmet. An exceptionally calm Charlie Fairchild said, "Nice shot! One problem Sergeant Pierson, you aimed too high. This time aim lower, try to hit the tracks."

Taking his advice, I aimed lower. Again, the bazooka belched flames and gently

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kicked my helmet. Again, I watched the projectile fly straight and true. This time it hit the right front drive sprocket of the Panther with a loud explosion and flying chunks of jagged metal. The results were immediate. The Panther was still in motion when the projectile struck. The right side track dropped off the damaged drive sprocket and the Panther, still being driven by it's left track, spun broadside to the road. Wedged in the steep narrow draw, the disabled Panther completely blocked the road, rendering it impassable to the following Panzer column.

Suddenly Corporal Fairchild grabbed me and pulled me to my knees. At the same instant the Panther fired it's 75mm cannon in our direction. The powerful muzzle blast at close range, plus the savage concussion, caused by the passing high velocity projectile, tore away my helmet and knocked me flat. In the process, the chin strap of the helmet scratched my face and severely tore my nose, causing blood to flow freely. As I lay on the ground dazed, unable to move, my ears ringing, my sight blurred, and my life's blood staining the white snow red, I thought, "God, is this where I am going to die?"

On the verge of passing out, my mind recognized the sharp crack of small arms fire around me and the loud explosion of artillery shells. My reaction was to get up and run. When I tried to get up, I became dizzy and suddenly the lights went out.

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Brownie and Jim Lemley were talking a mile-a-minute as we back-tracked our way through the thick woods toward "A" Battery. They were fully charged with adrenaline. Charlie Fairchild and I were both half-sick, glad to be alive, and thankful to be helped along the trail by the two able PFCs. The forest was deathly silent. Charlie

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must have regained his senses more quickly than I, because he was the first to ask a question.

"Brownie, what happened back there?"

"Corporal, I can't believe that first shot. Sarge hit the damned Panther dead center and didn't even phase it. Just about the time you guys got the second bazooka round off, I got "A" Battery on the radio and told them where I thought the Panther was located. They alerted Sergeant Alford's howitzer crew. But before I could get any more information to them, the Krauts fired their damned 75 at you two, and I ducked. When I looked up I thought they got you two because I didn't see you in the deep snow, and then I heard small arms fire."

Jim Lemley jumped into the conversation explaining, "That was me! After the Krauts fired their 75, the hatch cover opened and the tank jockeys started to pile out of their damned Panther. I shot several of them, I don't know how many. I know I didn't get them all, because the hatch cover slammed shut again and some of them stayed inside. But I left a couple lying in the snow on the road."

The walk in the cold air and the animated conversation began to clear the fog from my brain. "Jim, I heard some loud explosions too. What were they?"

"I don't really know Sarge. I do know, what ever they were, they saved our butts!"

A still animated Brownie exclaimed, "It was Sergeant Alford! "A" Battery finally got a radio out to his howitzer position and I told Sergeant Alford we had got one tank, but I could hear some more coming up the road."

Lemley agreed, "I could hear them too."

Charlie Fairchild asked, "What did you tell Sergeant Alford, Brownie?"

"Well, not much, I was kind of shaking by this time. I didn't know what had happened to Jim and I couldn't tell whether that 75mm round got you two or not. Barney Alford couldn't see the Panther, and he didn't wand to fire blind because he didn't want to hit us. I told him I was high up on the hill, away from the road, but I didn't know where anyone else was. I told him the Panther was only disabled and should be destroyed so the others behind it couldn't use the road. About this time, the second Panther came into view and Barney told me to duck, then he fired. The damnedest thing happened. He fired just a little high and his 105mm HEAT (High Explosive Anti Tank) round passed right over the damaged tank and hit the second one. Boy, what a sight! That HEAT round penetrated the Panther armor like a hot knife cutting butter. The round exploded inside the Panther, set it on fire, and then all the Kraut ammunition inside the Panther started exploding. When I told Sergeant Alford what had happened, he said we might as well finish off the first Panther too. His second round of HEAT was a little lower and hit the first Panther. The same thing happened again; fire, exploding ammunition, the whole ball-of-wax. That is probably what you remember hearing Sarge."

Jim Lemley confirmed Brownies story and added, "I was closer to those tanks than Brownie was. What he probably doesn't know is, I heard a third tracked vehicle come to a stop, grind into reverse, and backed the Hell away from the fire and all the exploding ammunition. The way things were popping, I had to hit the ground. That's

why Brownie couldn't see me"

"Jim, did you see, or hear, any Kraut infantry supporting the Panzers?"

"No Sarge, the three Kraut Panzers were probably just a patrol. No evidence of infantry - not ours, not theirs. I wonder what happened to our infantry? How did the Kraut armor get through them?"

"I don't know Jim. Brownie did you hear what Jim said? Two Kraut tanks destroyed, one got away, the road to Prum is blocked with two tank hulls, no infantry has been heard or seen - ours or theirs?"

"Yes Sarge, I heard him."

"Did you send that information to Battalion?"

"Damn Sarge, I've been too busy ducking shells and pulling you through this snow to fool with the radio!"

"Damn it Brownie, the Colonel sent us up here to obtain information. Now we have some. What good is it if we are the only ones who know it? Lets stop right hear and you call Battalion right now. Give them our information and ask them for permission to come in. If they say yes, call "A" Battery and tell them the four of us are on the way back. I don't want to argue with another fucking firing battery guard like we did last time. Think you can handle that Brownie?"

"Come on Sergeant, lighten-up a little, you know I can."

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About six hours after we had left to establish a listening and observation post on the road to Prum, Germany, we reached the howitzer position of Sergeant Barney Alford.

During the time we were gone from Battalion, the situation for the 589th had changed drastically. Sergeant Alford and his crew still manned the 105mm howitzer which commanded the road to Prum. The rest of the firing battery seemed to be in constant motion. Vehicle wheels churning the mud and snow and personnel working frantically, preparing to withdraw. The confusion was not organized, it was more like every man for himself.

Barney had the familiar wad of tobacco bulging in his cheek. As we approached, he decided to spit, making a large brown stain in the snow. He grinned when he saw the four of us, shoved his helmet back on his head and asked, "Randy, what in the hell happened to you?"

My nose had started to swell and I had forgotten I had blood all over my face and overcoat. "I got the million dollar wound buddy. I'm headed back to the States!"

"Bull shit Randy, I've cut myself worse than that shaving. Have you heard the news?"

"No, my ears are ringing so loud I can hardly hear anything Barney. What's up?"

I heard "B" Battery was supposed to move back to 'Baker Rear' several hours ago, but it is still bogged down in their position. They can't even get one howitzer our to the road, let alone their ammunition. Division Artillery just ordered then to disable their weapons and abandon them. They are salvaging what equipment they can, but I don't think it will be much."

"What about "C" Battery?"

"They are reported to be under direct attack by armor and infantry coming from

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the north. The main German attacking force has broken through the town of Auw and is headed this way. "C" Battery can't withdraw under attack and they certainly can't defend themselves without infantry support."

"Have you heard anything about Lieutenant Clausen? He was supposed to establish an observation post somewhere on the road to Auw,"

"Yea, I know. Randy, nobody knows anything about the Lieutenant or his driver, your buddy Guy Smith. Dead or captured, I guess."

"Shit, I hate to hear stuff like that about Guy and the Lieutenant. What's going on in "A" Battery?"

"The Colonel gave us "Close Station - March Order and Withdraw" to 'Able Rear' about thirty minutes ago. We already got two pieces and their prime movers sitting on the road headed west. Of course my howitzer will be last, but I can get on the road in about five minutes. Somebody has to bring up the rear. We got problems with one section though. Both the howitzer and the prime mover are so deep in the mud you can't even see the axels. Captain Menke is about ready to leave both of them. Division Artillery wants some 105s back in the rear position and ready to shoot. Looks like all they will get is our three. Three howitzers our of twelve, that's pretty fucking sad, isn't it?"

"Barney, what about Headquarters Battery?"

"Oh, they are already gone. Only the Colonel is still here. He's with the Captain and talking about going forward to the Infantry to find out what is going on. I think you guys are supposed to hitch a ride with us when we withdraw to the rear position. Hang

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around and don't get lost."

"Barney, you couldn't lose me if you tried."

Corporal Fairchild walked up and announced he had found his 3/4 ton Dodge truck and asked if Brown and Lemley could help him load it. He also offered the three of us a ride to the CP Rear. I accepted his offer and instructed Brown and Lemley to help Charlie load his truck and pick-up some extra cans of gasoline and a couple of cases of "C" or "K" rations because we might need them later. After the guys left, Barney and I propped up on the frozen parapet surrounding his howitzer and talked while I waited for the 3/4 ton Dodge to arrive, and Barney waited for permission to withdraw his howitzer and crew. Several vehicles and trailers passed, including the mess truck. The cooks hanging out the rear of the mess truck waved good-bye as they passed. It was now about 1400 hours. I had not eaten breakfast and was getting hungry. Oh well, we should be back at the rear Command Post by 1500 hours. Back there the mess truck would be set-up and the cooks could scrounge something for us to eat.

Barney and I noticed the fog was starting to burn away and we could see patches of clear blue sky. The air was cold and still. We were engaged in chit-chat when one of Barney's howitzer crew interrupted us. Pointing with his arm, he asked,, "Sergeant, what is that black thing on the hill across the field?"

Barney squinted and looked in the direction of the Cannoneers pointing arm as I uncovered my binoculars. Raising the binoculars to my eyes and adjusting them on the black object on the distant hill resulted in a spontaneous response, "OH SHIT! It's part of the damned Panzer patrol!"

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Barney spit, threw his helmet into the gun pit, and jumped in after it. He beat the gunner to the gunner's seat on the howitzer and started traversing the 105 tube in the direction of the German tank. When the howitzer tube was pointed in the general direction of the Panzer, he yelled, "Give me a HEAT - Give me a HEAT!" Then over his shoulder he asked, "Randy, what is the range?"

It was easy to measure the height of the Panzer using the graduated cross hairs of my artillery binoculars. From this measurement I mentally estimated the range from the howitzer to the Panzer. "Six hundred yards, Barney."

With his eye glued to the sight, he adjusted the elevation of the tube and placed the cross hairs of the sight on the Panzer. As a cannoneer rammed a HEAT round into the breach, the #1 cannoneer slammed the breach-block closed and simultaneously yelled, "READY!"

The clear image in my binoculars told me we were faced with another Mk V Panther It was sitting broad-side to us on the crest of a slight hill, silhouetted against the now blue sky. The hatch was open and the German tank commander was studying the tree-line to our left. It was plain as day, we had spotted him, but he had not yet spotted us.

With the proper elevation set and the sight bubbles level, Barney gave the command, "FIRE!" Instinctively, the # 1 cannoneer pulled the lanyard. Following a powerful muzzle blast and a sharp recoil of the tube, the HEAT round was on the way. As soon as the howitzer tube returned to battery from recoil, a cannoneer had another round of HEAT ready to load into the howitzer in case the first round missed the target.

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The first round struck it's mark, slightly to the rear of the massive turret, almost in the engine compartment. A sure place for a kill. As seen through the binoculars, the explosion was clear, but seemed to be quite weak. Nothing like the terrible explosions I had seen on the firing range at Camp Atterbury when we were practicing direct fire. The explosion seemed to be against the exterior, not inside the Panther, and was almost puny. To my astonishment, and to the astonishment of the German tank commander, the clear air around the Panther was suddenly filled with flying paper. Almost like ticker-tape floating down on a Wall Street parade.

This weird display, clearly visible to the naked eye, surprised everyone in the howitzer crew. In fact, one cannoneer blurted out, "What in the Hell happened?"

Barney Alford's answer was extremely concise, "We hit the son-of-a-bitch with a shell PROPAGANDA! That's what happened. Each piece of paper you see fluttering around out there is a fucking Surrender Leaflet."

Being no mind reader myself, I had no idea what thoughts raced through the German tank commander's mind when I observed him grab a flying leaflet. All I know is that when he briefly read the large bold print that said in German, "ATTENTION - ATTENTION," "SURRENDER - SURRENDER," he quickly closed his hatch and the Panther disappeared into defilade behind the hill. The last thing I remember hearing was the sound of the powerful Panther engine getting softer and softer as it headed swiftly in the direction of Prum, Germany.

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Sitting on the floor of the unheated farm house, now designated as Command Post Rear, half asleep and still half into my bed roll, I thought, "Yesterday was just one big mess. Too many things had happened too damned fast!" Several things constantly reminded me how rough the day had been. My swollen, torn nose and my half scabbed-over face, smeared with Army Iodine, hurt like hell. These features, combined with two days growth of beard and filthy clothing made me look like something only a mother could love. My head ached and my ears still rang, in plain English, I was miserable!

Even in the ice and snow, the trip from the forward "A" Battery position would normally have taken fifteen or twenty minutes. However, yesterday we had been blocked by stalled vehicles and foot troops the entire journey. We encountered a few organized convoys of units trying to withdraw, but mainly the road was jammed with individual vehicles fighting for road space in an effort to leave the combat area. Many vehicles were marked with unit insignia I had did not recognize. It was the scene of a frantic rout, not one of an orderly withdrawal.

Charley Fairchild had driven the last mile using black-out lights called 'Cat Eyes.' The Command Post Rear was dark when Charlie pulled to a stop in front of the farm house. The four of us dismounted the 3/4 ton and I asked Charlie if he wanted to spend the night with us, but he declined, "Sergeant Pierson, I am supposed to be with "A" Battery so I guess I had better find where they are. I'll stay with Sergeant Alford's crew

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if I can find them." I hated for Charlie to be wandering around in the dark by himself, but what he had to do was his own decision, not mine.

Hot chow had already been served by the time we found the blacked-out mess truck and the only warm food still available was hot coffee. Staff Sergeant Webb, the mess sergeant, did heat a can of pork and beans for each of us by immersing the cans into the hot coffee for a few minutes. We then ate the semi-heated "C" rations and drank freely of the hot, black coffee. The total food for the day - one lousy "C" ration and a canteen cup of hot coffee.

Lieutenant Colonel Kelly had not arrived at Command Post Rear when Major Parker finally let me sack down for the remainder of the night. No one seemed to know anything about the situation. Before I dropped off to sleep I hoped things would return to normal and would be more organized when I reported to the fire direction center in the morning. I thought, Fire Direction, that's a laugh, down to eight howitzers, no forward observers, and no communications with the infantry. Why set up a fire direction center anyway? With that question unanswered, I fell fast asleep.

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Someone shook my shoulder and aroused me from a troubled semi-sleeping condition, "Sergeant, Captain Huxel wants you in the CP."

Rolling up my sleeping bag and gathering my personal gear was a chore. I hated getting our of my warm 'fart sack' in a cold room. Brownie, Lemley and a couple of other guys were still asleep and I did not awaken them. I carried my gear to load into the Command Post truck, just in case we had to move-out in a hurry. The 2 1/2 ton GMC

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had not been unloaded, it was still full, but the 3/4 ton Dodge had been partially unloaded. Both drivers seemed worried as they briefly acknowledged me with a dull, "Morning Sarge."

The cooks at the mess truck had not unloaded, but were cooking, if you call it that, in the back of their 2 1/2 ton GMC. The Mess Sergeant loaned me a spare mess kit and served up scrambled dried eggs, soupy Cream-of-Wheat, soggy toast, and boiling hot coffee. As bad as it was, I almost enjoyed this hot breakfast. But things got worse! I scalded my lips on the burning hot metal rim of the canteen cup when I took the first sip of coffee. "How could the cup be so hot when the weather was so cold?" I then wondered, "Jesus, what can happen next?" Little did I know!

Major Parker and Captain Huxel were the only officers I found in the Command Post. Apprehension was obvious in the eyes of the enlisted men and each officer. We had lost communications with everyone except "A" Battery, which was just across the road. "A" Battery had established a listening post beside the main road, just east of our position, and observers were beginning to report sounds of movement in the darkness just before dawn. German or American? No one knew!

At first light, Major Parker ordered "A" Battery to move to the road and start forming a convoy heading west. The Major left the remnants of "B" and "C" Batteries in place, facing east, to cover the convoy's withdrawal. Captain Huxel was ordered to start preparing Headquarters Battery to join "A" Battery in the now forming convoy.

About 0700 hours, the listening post reported hearing tank movement in the distance. This report confirmed the fact that the movement was German, there was no

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American armor in the vicinity. "A" Battery observer personnel were withdrawn to join the convoy.

By 0720 hours the head of the convoy was moving slowly westward on the ice-covered road leading toward Schoenberg. The column was to cross the Our River bridge, which was believed to be intact. Across the Our River, the column was to make it's way through the town of Schoenberg, which was weakly defended by the 81st Combat Engineers, but also believed to be partially occupied by enemy forces. Once successfully through Schoenberg, the convoy was to turn southwest and make it's way to the town of St. Vith, Belgium and the Headquarters of the 106th Infantry Division.

Major Parker remained behind to herd "B" Battery and the miscellaneous Headquarters personnel through Schoenberg. I, of course, was one of the remaining Headquarters Battery personnel. The Major asked me to make one last check of the Command Post while he went to "B" Battery.

As I hurried, making the rounds, burning secret documents and rousting guys out to the waiting vehicles, I heard the remaining Headquarters Battery vehicles beginning to leave the position. For some unknown reason I started wondering what happened to my friends in "C" Battery and hoped they had gotten out of their lousy position during the early hours of darkness last night. Finally all of my men were accounted for but Brownie. I then remembered the last time I had seen him he was asleep upstairs in the farmhouse. I bounded the stairs, and sure enough, Brownie was still asleep in his bed roll. A deep sleep, totally exhausted, almost like in a coma.

"Brownie, get up! The battery is leaving! Get the Hell up!"

Brownie seemed drugged. He sat up and stared at the wall. His eyes were open, but they didn't see. I shook him and slapped his face. "Brownie, it's Sergeant

Pierson! Damn it, wake up!" He showed no signs of recognition, nothing happened. Brownie was covered with cold sweat. He was going into shock and I did not know why. I could not drag him our into the bitter cold, it would kill him. What could I do? I did the only thing I knew to do to save his life. I laid him back down in his warm bed roll, made him comfortable, and gave him a shot of morphine. With tears in my eyes and my heart aching with grief, I left my friend Brownie in the hands of our maker.

Outside, everyone and everything but one jeep was gone. I jumped into the driver's seat and turned the switch. The starter worked fine, but the engine would not start. I tried again and again, but the jeep refused to start. Frantically looking for what was wrong, I noticed the gas gage was on empty. Some lame-brained idiot had burned all the gas last night using the heater, trying to keep warm. I ran to the rear of the jeep and checked the spare five gallon gas can - it too was empty.

Standing alone in the quiet forest surrounding the farm house, I could now hear the sound of clanking tank treads on the ice-covered road plus the roar of tank engines in the distance and realized I had to get out of here! I half ran and half walked to the main road and looked east. Nothing was visible, but I could hear the oncoming tanks more clearly now. No one could outrun a tank on foot, but I started running west toward Schoenberg anyway. I needed to get some curves in the road between me and the oncoming Germans as quickly as possible so they could not spot me. My big problem, the road was very straight for about one mile. I had to run! I had to try! Adrenaline was

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now my best friend!

As I ran, a 3/4 ton Dodge weapons carrier pulled out of the woods and onto the road about four hundred yards in front of me and turned west toward Schoenberg. The weapons carrier was loaded with men, maybe eight or ten. I yelled and frantically waved my arms hoping to attract someone's attention. The truck slowed and I ran harder. When I got within one hundred yards of the vehicle, I heard some of the occupants yelling at the driver to speed up, while others were yelling for him to stop. At this point we were still on the straight part of the road and extremely vulnerable to tank fire.

The driver, in desperation, decided to accelerate the speed of the vehicle. The distance from me to the vehicle began to increase. Two hundred yards, three hundred yards - I was running and screaming. My heart was pounding. The cold air was freezing my lungs. My legs were turning to jelly. I suddenly thought I was not going to make it. Then a strange thing happened! In the cold crisp air, I could hear it as plain as day. A strong voice rose above the others, "It's Sergeant Pierson - STOP THIS DAMNED TRUCK!"

The Dodge brake lights came on, I will never forget the welcomed bright red glow as the vehicle came to a full stop. I continued to run as fast as I could. Three hundred yards - two hundred yards - one hundred yards - I thought maybe I'll make it. With the last bit of strength left in my spent body, I collapsed on the tailgate of the weapons carrier. Four strong arms grabbed my overcoat and roughly pulled me onto the back of the vehicle as an unknown voice commanded the driver to, "HIT IT!" The Dodge fish tailed severely and the four wheels spun as we gained speed on the icy road.

Reclining on top of the humanity packed in the bed of the weapons carrier I had an excellent view of the road behind us. As we entered our first long and sweeping curve in the road, the front end of a large gray panzer came into view. When we successfully

negotiated the second curve in the road unseen, I prayed and thanked 'The Almighty' for his help.

The weapons carrier was now traveling too fast for the road conditions. Even though we wanted to put as much space between us and the advancing enemy as quickly as possible, this pace was dangerous. The up-front passenger finally spoke up, "Fairchild, slow this thing down. If we end up in the ditch, they will catch us for sure."

Charlie Fairchild slowed the pace of the weapons carrier gradually. When he had the vehicle under solid control he turned his head and said, "Welcome aboard Sarge. If I had known that was you back there in the road I wouldn't have made you run so hard." I was so thankful to be on board, so tired, and was thinking about Charlie bailing me out of trouble yesterday, all I could say was, "Thanks Charlie, now I owe you two big ones."

The 3/4 ton weapons carrier was an open truck. No top, no sides, only a windshield up front. It beat walking, but riding in the back of Fairchild's truck was cold! After riding a few miles, without observing either friend or foe, the fear of being killed or captured gave way to cold and the urge to urinate. By unanimous decision, Fairchild pulled to a stop on the side of the road. In unison, twelve men bailed out of the vehicle, unzipped their flies, pulled out their peckers, and started to piss. All you could hear was groans of relief and all you could see was twelve columns of steam slowly rising from twelve yellow holes in the cold white snow.

-8-

While we were trying to walk some warmth back into our cramped legs, I recognized only Corporal Fairchild and two others. I moved over to where Charlie Fairchild was inspecting his truck and asked him about the strangers. He said they were guys from the 422nd Infantry Regiment who had somehow made it back to "A" Battery during the night and he was supposed to get them to St. Vith.

As we started to get back on the weapons carrier an infantrymen swung himself into the front seat. Corporal Fairchild quickly admonished him, "Get in the back, Sergeant Pierson is the ranking non-com on board. He is in charge now, he sits up front."

As we resumed our travel toward the Our River, Charlie Fairchild and I discussed the situation. Not knowing whether the bridge was still intact, or whether or not the town of Schoenberg was under American control, we decided to park the weapons carrier in a wooded area just short of a hill which overlooked the Our River valley, and moved to the crest of the hill on foot. The ranking infantry non-com turned out to be a corporal, a rifle squad leader. Corporal Andy Donaldson was from Houston, Texas, and was all business. He was very cooperative when I asked him to establish a perimeter guard between the road and the hidden vehicle. After he had positioned his men, he returned to the hill to find out the next step.

"Charlie, Andy, I may be the ranking non-com here, but this is not my ball of wax. We have to evaluate the situation together and then figure out the best chance of getting to St. Vith. I think we should move to the crest of the hill, stay hidden for a while, and try to figure the situation. We must find the best odds to get down this hill, across the Our River, through Schoenberg, and over the hill west of Schoenberg.

-9-

Looking at the map, it looked like we will be in the open, and under observation, all the way. Do you guys agree?

(Two)

On a hill overlooking the village of Schoenberg and the Our River valley - 1030 Hours

From our vantage point on the forward slope of a hill on the east side of the Our River, the view was magnificent. The long graceful hill sloped to the river. A gently

winding road meandered down the hill and connected with the still intact Our River bridge. The war damage to the buildings in Schoenberg was masked by heavy snow. The road running west, away from Schoenberg, snaked its way up the distant hill and disappeared over the crest of a ridge, on its way to St. Vith. This tranquil scene was very deceptive and gave us no clues to the dangers we faced.

Sketchy information led us to believe the Germans had pushed through the town of Auw, which was only five mile north and east of Schoenberg. We had been led to believe the Americans controlled the south western section of Schoenberg, and the Germans controlled the rest. Apparently the route we must take through Schoenberg traversed some type of no-mans-land, between the opposing forces.

Charlie, Andy, and I, took turns observing the beautiful panorama in front of us. through my field glasses. We could not detect movement of any kind, nor could we hear firing of any type, or sounds of vehicles moving. Slowly we put together our plan. With nothing else to guide us, the plan was based upon the assumption that once across the Our River bridge, the Germans would be on our right, and the Americans on our left. We hoped the Americans would not fire on us, and assumed the Germans would. Once fired

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upon, Charlie would drive like hell, get across the bridge fast, through Schoenberg as quickly as possible, and over the ridge west of Schoenberg as fast as the 3/4 ton vehicle would go. The plan was simple and primitive.

When we returned to the truck, we explained our withdrawal plan to the rest of the men. In return, we received blank stares and one questions. One of the infantry men asked Andy, "Corporal Donaldson, what if I don't want to go?"

Corporal Donaldson wasted no words, "Willie, you don't have to come if you don't want to. Nobody will make you come. However, if you stay here by yourself, you will probably be captured or killed. Willie, you better stay with the truck, I think it's your best chance to survive."

"OK Corporal Donaldson, I just wanted to know."

"Anybody else have a question? If not, lets get the show on the road Sergeant Pierson."

"Before we move out, Charlie how about checking the truck and make sure it is ready to roll. Andy, get your men to reload the truck. Have them place as much gear on the right hand side of the truck bed as they can. Try to make a barricade they can get behind and fire over. Charlie will drive, and I'll ride shotgun up front."

Corporal Donaldson spoke up, "Sarge, if you don't mind, I think Johnny, my BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) man should ride up front. It will be cold, but if we put the windshield down, Johnny can lay down a lot of fire to the front of the vehicle while we are moving. The rest of us, in the back, can lay down fire on the right hand side. Since you seem to know where we are and where we have to go, I'd feel better if you would

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hunker down behind Corporal Fairchild and be ready to drive in case he gets hit."

"Andy, sounds good to me. Charlie, do you have any ideas?"

"Yea, a couple. Once we get going, I don't plan to stop for anything or anybody until we are west of the Our River valley and several miles down the road toward St Vith. Second, just keep your head down Sarge, I don't plan on getting hit."

"Charlie, Andy, I'm going out to the road and keep an eye open for vehicles. Get the gear rearranged in the weapons carrier, then load what weapons you have. When you are finished, move the truck out to the road and pick me up."

When I reached a vantage point where I could observe activity on the road, it was empty, nothing in sight. There were no sounds either. This situation gave me an eerie feeling, almost like being in the eye of a Florida hurricane, violent activity going on all around us, but perfectly quiet here. I finally heard Charlie start the truck motor, then heard the transmission growl as he shifted into low gear, and heard the crunch of freshly frozen snow as the truck began to move toward the road. Once on the road I climbed unto the bed of the truck and positioned myself directly behind Charlie, the driver. I told Charlie to take it easy until we got to the Our River bridge, or until we were taken under fire by the Germans, which ever came first, and then drive like hell. The trip up the hill gave me more confidence in Andy. He had barricaded the right side of the weapons carrier with gear and five of his men were ready to fire from that side of the truck. Up front, Johnny looked all business with his potent BAR. I thought, who knows, we might even make it to St Vith.

The road, winding down the reverse side of the hill was icy, but not what I would

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call treacherous. The ice and frozen snow were rough, not glazed, and provided half-way decent traction. Corporal Fairchild had the weapons carrier in second gear, and was able to keep it completely under control. During this decent, and about half way to the Our River bridge, we had neither seen nor heard anything. About three hundred yards from the bridge, the road started to level out and Charlie accelerated the movement of the weapons carrier slightly. Simultaneously a mortar round burst in the snow immediately to our rear. That round was the signal Charlie was waiting for! He shifted the transmission into high gear and the race began. The second mortar round exploded squarely behind us, leaving a dirty gray stain in the fresh snow. The enemy had obviously zeroed in on the bridge with their mortars. While we were crossing the bridge, the third mortar round exploded in the river nearby and drenched us with frigid water and flying chunks of ice.

After we safely crossed the Our River and entered Schoenberg, war damage to the town was now clearly visible. Buildings bore the marks of house to house fighting and many had no roofs. The cobble stone street was narrow, slippery, and winding. Fairchild had to reduce speed to negotiate sharp turns in the road. Our nerves were tense and our eyes moved constantly, always searching for signs of the enemy.

Fortunately Charlie Fairchild and Andy Donaldson were both blessed with common sense and I felt it was common sense, not army training, that would get us through Schoenberg and back to St Vith. Charlie raced the weapons carrier through the first two intersection. At the third intersection we drew fire, some 'Burp Guns,' but mostly rifle fire. Before we reached the fourth intersection, Charlie brought the truck to

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a halt beside a protective building. He revved up the engine, which sounded like a moving vehicle, and immediately all hell broke lose at the fourth intersection. The Germans had anticipated our crossing of that intersection and had laid down heavy small arms fire to nail us when we tried to go through. Eventually, when no vehicle crossed the intersection, the German firing stopped.

We sat there in the shelter of the building, the truck engine idling slowly, wondering what to do. How could we get through this intersection with the enemy sitting

there, prepared and anxious to do us in. I'll admit, I was afraid and didn't know what to do. Slowly, but surely, Andy began to take charge.

"Johnny, take the BAR and three men to the intersection. Try to spot the source of the German fire. If we stay here very long, they will send a squad to find us. Charlie, move the truck to the shelter of the building just short of the intersection, and do it quietly. I will take three men through the intersection, on foot, while Johnny and his men cover us. When I give the signal, Johnny's squad and my squad will lay down covering fire so you can get the truck through the intersection. Charlie, don't go far, just far enough to get out of the cross fire. My men will give Johnny and his men covering fire so they can get to my side of the intersection. If anyone gets hit during the fire fight, we'll try to get him to the truck. When we are all in the truck Charlie, take off and keep going. We had better take a chance and run the rest of the intersections before the Krauts can get reorganized and come after us with a tank or something. Maybe the Krauts don't have enough people in town yet to cover all the intersections. Sergeant Pierson, you got any other ideas?"

"Andy, I'm not an infantry squad leader, I don't know anything about house-to-house fighting. Just do your best and try to get us through Schoenberg."

"OK Sarge, the plan stands. Johnny, you and your men, Move Out! I'll be right behind you. One last word Corporal Fairchild, once you get rolling, don't try to 'bug-out' you're our bus ticket out of this mess. I promise, if you do try to 'bug-out' I'll put an M-1 slug through your head!"

This warning was hard for me to take. "For Christ's sake Andy, don't talk to Charlie like that. We are not going to run off and leave you. That's my promise!"

Thankful to be relieved of the current responsibilities and to have the infantry making the decisions, I propped up on the barricade in the back of the weapons carrier, checked my carbine and extra ammunition clips, and waited.

We heard scattered bursts of small arms fire when Andy and his three men scurried, one by one, across the intersection. Johnny's squad returned the enemy fire and seemed to squelch the Kraut attack somewhat.

At the intersection, everyone now in place,, Andy gave a motion to move the truck forward slowly. Charlie inched the vehicle forward and stopped in the shelter of the designated building. For a brief moment there was a dead silence. By voice command, Andy yelled at the two squads to "Commence Firing," and by hand, gave us the 'Double Time' signal to quickly move the weapons carrier across the intersection.

We caught the Germans by surprise. The whole action took less than thirty seconds. M-1s and Carbines firing, the BAR chattering, the vehicle vaulting, the Kraut's returning fire, and one of Johnny's men lying in the dirty intersection screaming, "I'm

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Hit! I'm Hit!"

Before anyone could react, heavy German fire was concentrated on the body of the wounded GI lying in the snow. The sight was awful, blood flying everywhere, the now dead body shivering and twisting from the force of enemy bullets. Even though I did not know the dead soldier, watching the GI's body being ripped to shreds by the barbaric volume of German fire made me sick. The poor guy did not have a chance. Fortunately, he did not suffer long.

Two infantrymen made a move in the direction of their dead friend, but they were immediately stopped by Andy. At his command, they all piled into the truck and Charlie started moving smartly down the slippery street. We crossed the remaining intersections

without incident. Even though no one on board the weapons carrier was hurt, I noticed that one enemy round had struck the tail gate of the vehicle, leaving a jagged and ugly hole in the metal. As we crossed the last intersection in Schoenberg, and moved into open farm land we encountered a five man German patrol approaching from our right. Apparently they were not expecting trouble because they were walking with their arms slung instead of at the ready position, which would be normal for a combat patrol. Johnny spotted them first and fired a full clip from his BAR at them, the BAR set for automatic fire. The rest of us started firing from behind the barricade in the moving vehicle. Four of the German soldiers were dropped in the field immediately, either dead or wounded, the fifth fled behind a building, apparently unhurt.

Now, out of Schoenberg, Corporal Fairchild had the Dodge engine wound up tight, the engine growling as we raced over the rough iced surface of the road. About six

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hundred yards out of town, exploding mortar rounds started stalking the vehicle as it snaked westward across the Our River valley floor. We had survived about ten near misses when our luck ran out. One mortar round landed about ten yards to the right of the speeding Dodge. Shell fragments pierced the side of the truck in several places while other fragments passed over our heads, sounding like an attack of swarming insects. None of the fragments which struck the truck disabled it, but embedded themselves harmlessly in the thickly packed barricade.

I could feel the impact of the mortar fragments when they struck the vehicle and feared some of the men might have been wounded by this near miss. My fears prompted me to raise my head and check on Charlie and Johnny who were riding in the front seats relatively unprotected. I was relieved to find both men unhurt and hunched low to avoid the mortar fire and the searing cold wind. Feeling good about our continued good luck, I settled back down on the floor of the truck bed, only to have the infantryman next to me moan, "Sergeant, I think I'm hit."

Sure enough, one piece of shell fragment had penetrated both the metal of the truck body and the bulk of the barricade. It's force almost spent, the metal shard had embedded itself deeply into the soldier's left shoulder. The backs of his garments were torn and soaked with blood. The shiny metal shard was clearly visible in the mangled flesh of the open wound. His situation, as of now, was not fatal, but it certainly was not good. With the help of a buddy, we turned him face down and removed pieces of cloth from the wound. We sprinkled Sulfa powder from his first aid kit into the wound to prevent infection. We then tied a tight compression bandage over the wound to slow the

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bleeding. When that was completed, we rolled him over onto his right side and covered him with overcoats and canvas to help keep him warm and to prevent him from going into shock. During this process I was afraid to remove the metal shard. Removing it might aggravate the wound and cause added loss of blood. The constant jarring of the truck, as it bounced over the rough terrain, was not good for the wounded rifleman either, but this could not be helped.

Without looking, I could sense the weapons carrier was starting up an incline. We were leaving the valley floor and the exploding mortar rounds behind. Maybe we would be fortunate enough to pass over the western ridge of the Our River valley and reach the St Vith highway without suffering any additional casualties.

By this time, the initial numbness of the rifleman's wound was giving way to pain. The wounded man became restless and started to groan. Andy located a morphine Syrette and handed it to me. I injected the morphine into his torn shoulder and the

rifleman gradually calmed down and fell into a blessed sleep. Blood was still oozing through the compress bandage. He wasn't losing blood fast, but the constant bumping of the truck seemed to keep his wound open. We had to get him to an aid station before it was too late!

Directly ahead the crest of the hill was a beautiful sight. We were out of mortar range, and so far, we had not attracted panzer or artillery fire. A few more minutes of good luck and the Krauts would no longer be able to observe our flight. As we briefly raced along the ridge, moving south parallel to the river, I raised my binoculars to get one last look at Schoenberg before we crested the hill. As far as I was concerned, nothing

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had changed, however for us, things were looking better.

(Three)

On the road to St. Vith, Belgium

17 December 1944 - 1400 Hours

St Vith was about seven miles from Schoenberg, using the secondary roads through Heuen and Setz. Under normal circumstances it was a short and pleasant trip, but these were far from normal circumstances. We had been out of contact with everyone for more than twelve hours and lack of information complicated things. We knew the situation was SNAFU (Situation Normal, All Fucked Up) and felt we might run into Krauts at any moment. This was no pleasure trip and we were not on our way to a picnic in the country. Our survival was at stake!

The first mile and one half to Heuen was relatively uneventful, but we moved slowly and cautiously. We passed shot-up and abandoned vehicles and picked up four additional foot soldiers who were lost and not certain where to go. Other stragglers tried to bum a ride, but the vehicle was already overloaded and could not accommodate them. However, we did tell them how to get to St Vith, the only city in the immediate area we . knew was still under American control.

In the village of Heuen, things became more difficult. MPs were trying to stem the flow of stragglers and several infantry officers were trying to organize a defense of the village. One of these officers tried to stop us from passing through the village. I had to assert myself and told the officer we were under orders to report to the 106th Division Artillery in St Vith as quickly as possible, and I intended to carry out that order. I also pointed out I had to evacuate one of my wounded men and we had current knowledge

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that Schoenberg was now in enemy hands and that the Our River bridge was still intact, and our Division Commander needed this information. The obviously weary infantry officer finally 'got the picture,' and allowed us to depart the village.

From Heuen to Setz, another mile and one half, the trip was a different story. Our vehicle finally become entangled in what appeared to be a full scale retreat. We observed vehicles operated by frantic, wild-eyed drivers, competing for precious road space to the rear with lost, battle shocked, foot soldiers. Speed for all traffic was held to the pace of the slowest foot soldier. Occasionally a vehicle would run out of gas, or break down, and block the road, adding to the congestion. Things were out of control, no one was in charge. It took more than one hour to negotiate that mile and one half.

Things did not get much better between Setz and St Vith. By the time we reached the American main line of resistance, north and east of St Vith it was now past 1700 hours. The seven mile trip had taken more than three hours. Shortly after we crossed back into American held territory, Charlie Fairchild spotted a 589th Headquarters Battery jeep parked on the side of the road. Captain George Huxel was sitting on the hood and intently reading the unit designation on each bumper as the vehicles passed. A smile came on his face when he saw the 589th Service Battery marking on our weapons carrier, and waved us off of the road. Charlie parked next to the Captain's jeep and I crawled out of our cramped vehicle, reported to Captain Huxel, and began to engage him in conversation.

As Captain Huxel was asking about trailing vehicles and missing personnel, Andy Donaldson interrupted the conversation, "Captain, I'm Corporal Donaldson, Company B,

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422nd Infantry Regiment. I have a wounded man to get to an aid station and I have to get my other men back to our unit. Will you help me Sir?"

A little surprised at Andy's urgency, Captain Huxel replied, "Of course I'll help you Corporal. Load your wounded man into my jeep, my driver will take you and him to an aid station. As for the rest of your men, I suggest they stay with Sergeant Pierson until we find out where you should report."

(Four)

In bivouac west of St Vith, Belgium
17 December 1944 - 1830 Hours

Andy's men quickly loaded their wounded buddy into the Captain's jeep. Moments later the jeep and occupants were on the road to an aid station in St Vith. After his jeep had disappeared into the fading light, Captain Huxel climbed into the front seat of the weapons carrier, next to Corporal Fairchild, and started pumping me for information as we rode the short distance to the 589th Field Artillery Battalion bivouac area. During this interrogation I realized how physically and emotionally drained I was. It had been another long, tough, day! When we reached the 589th Command Post, Frank Tacker and Dell Miller started the interrogation all over again. Everyone was hungry for information. They were both surprised to learn the jeep they had left for me would not start, and how I had to leave Brownie. It really hurt me to leave Brownie, and I told them how bad I felt. They made me feel a little better when they assured me I had done everything anyone could have done except stay with him, and staying with him under the circumstances did not make good sense.

Miller finally asked me if I was hungry, and it dawned on me I had eaten only two

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meals in the past two days. I told Dell I felt lousy and maybe some food would help. Dell then walked me to the mess truck just in time to get fed with the infantry guys we had brought in. Thanks to our dedicated mess sergeant, we had a hot meat with lots of coffee. As Dell and I were finishing our second cup of coffee, Andy returned from the aid station. He wanted to talk about his men, but I told him to eat first, while the food was still hot. Between each mouth full, Andy told us his wounded man had lost lots of blood, the medics had removed the shell fragment, gave him plasma, and re-bandaged him for evacuation to the rear. The medics also told him they thought his man would be OK. Andy also told us he had located some rear echelon type from the 422nd Infantry Regiment in St Vith who told him where to find the remnants of the 422nd. Andy wanted to know if Fairchild would drive him and his men to the other side of town. Charlie was

pooped also, but finally agreed to take the infantrymen wherever they needed to go. As the infantrymen loaded into the back of Charlie's weapons carrier, I thanked them all for getting us through Schoenberg and wished them good luck in the future.

On the way back to the CP, Dell showed me the location of the command post truck where my bedroll and personal gear was stowed. When Dell departed for the CP, I told him I was going to clean up a little and then get some sleep. I silently prayed I would be left alone and not have to pull duty in the Command Post until I felt better. Robert Hunt, the CP truck driver, wondered what had happened to me. He was glad to see me and helped me find my bedroll and musette bag, which contained my personal gear. While I was washing and shaving, we talked. He said no one knew where the Krauts were located, or what the situation was. He had heard German paratroopers had

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landed to our rear to cut off our supply and communication lines. He had heard about specially trained German soldiers, dressed in American uniforms who spoke good English, who were reversing road signs and acting like American MPs to give misleading information to American troops on the move. These specially trained German troops were also reportedly killing American stragglers. Robert had also heard of the massacre of a group of captured American Artillerymen at a town in Belgium named Malmedy. His assessment was, the situation is really SNAFU!

During our conversation I told Hunt I was dead tired and had to get some sleep, but I wanted to bed down where I would not be found, or get left in case the unit had to pull out in a hurry. My Tennessee buddy, Private First Class Bob Hunt told me, "Sarge, the truck is almost fully loaded, just put your 'fart sack' on top of the gear that is loaded up front near the cab. You should be safe and comfortable there. Get under the canvas top in case we get snow tonight." He also assured me, "I won't run off and leave you Sarge, you have my word on it!"

Another thing Bob, I don't particularly want anyone to find me if they come looking. "Don't worry Sarge, I ain't even seen you!"

Knowing that PFC Hunt would keep his word, I climbed into the truck, spread my bed roll on top of the gear near the cab, took off my combat boots, wiggled into my bed roll, and made myself comfortable. My anxieties slowly gave way to a full stomach, the warmth of the bed roll, and the realization that for moment I was safe. Quickly my conscious brain ceased to function, fatigue put out my lights, and I fell into a deep, but very troubled sleep.

THE OD YEARS: WWII AMERICANA

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE ARDENNES OFFENSIVE - DAY 3

(One)

Orders are received to deploy to Recht

18 December 1944 - 0100 Hours

The stupor of deep sleep began to wear off. My troubled dreams had seemed real. I was relieved to hear friendly voices in the dark. Finally truck and jeep motors all around me coughed, sputtered, and finally came to life. Then people, real American GIs started climbing into the rear of the 2 1/2 ton GMC command post truck. One clown climbed right on top of me in the darkness, mistaking me for a duffle bag. I thrashed out with a free arm, trying to protect myself, and as I grunted a warning to my unknown

tormenter, my friend Jim Lemley remarked in surprise, "Excuse me Sarge, I didn't see you. When did you catch up with us?"

"I don't really know Jim. What time is it anyway?"

"It's 0100 hours."

"0100 hours? 0100 hours of what day?"

"Come on Sarge, you must really be out of it. It's the 18th. What day do you think it is?"

"Hell Jim, when you jumped on top of me, I was sleeping so hard, I thought that damned Kraut Panther was still after us."

"Well Sarge, that Panther won't bother you again, we creamed it good almost two days ago."

"Lemley, it feels like the truck is rolling. What's going on?"

"We just received orders from Division to move to a little village named Recht and set up a road block there."

"I've never heard of Recht, is it in Belgium or Germany?"

"It's a little village in Belgium, six or seven miles north and west of St Vith."

"You mean there are Germans west of St Vith? I thought that area still belonged to the Allies."

"The Corps Commander thinks the Germans up north of us will penetrate to the west and then turn south. If they can do that, we will be cut off, then the Krauts would have us in some kind of pocket. The General doesn't want that to happen so he ordered us to Recht to set up a blocking action there. We are supposed to keep the northern portion of the German pincer movement from closing."

"Well that is interesting. How long do you think it will take us to get to Recht and set up this blocking action?"

"I don't know Sarge, but in this ice and snow, and driving at night under black-out conditions, I guess it will take three or four hours, even if we are lucky."

"Lemley, I'm going back to sleep. Be sure and wake me up when we get there."

"OK Sarge, get some shut-eye, I'll wake you up when we get there."

(Two)

Recht, Belgium - 0450 Hours

The convoy arrived in Recht while it was still dark and what was left of the men in Headquarters Battery started establishing a Command Post. To my dismay, I found

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out "B" Battery had not been able to disengage from the enemy infantry and withdraw from the second position yesterday. Some of the men escaped, but the four howitzers and their prime movers had been destroyed during the encounter. The loss of four more howitzers and the "B" Battery men was a terrible disaster. To make things worse, Miller told me that "A" Battery had lost one howitzer and it's prime mover to panzer fire while they were trying to negotiate the streets of Schoenberg. We were now left with only three howitzers and were short on men.

By 0700 hours a formidable road block had been established on three sides of Recht, each howitzer commanding the north, east, and west approaches to the vacated village. Within the village itself, land mines had been strategically placed in the narrow streets. These mine fields were covered by .30 and.50 caliber machine gun positions to prevent enemy infantry from detecting and removing the mines. Bazooka team locations had been established to cover sharp turns in the narrow streets of the village. These

sharp turns would stop a tank cold in its tracks and make it an easy target for a Bazooka as it tried to negotiate the tight turn.

Everything was in place, but no Krauts were in sight. By 0800 hours, warming fires began to appear all over the area. The serious business of making coffee, heating "C" rations, cleaning up, and keeping warm became the order of the day.

As if to mock, or frustrate us, the command radio crackled to life in the Command Post at 0830 hours. Some staff officer at Division Headquarters broke all security guidelines, and in the clear, ordered the Battalion to withdraw from Recht and to move promptly to Bovingy. The result of this order was a mad scramble to defuse and

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remove the land mines we had laid, reload the trucks, and study maps to determine where, in the name of goodness, the village of Bovigny was located. Bovigny proved to be located some fourteen miles south and west of our current location. Sitting on a major road intersection west of St Vith, Bovigny looked like a gate in the fence guarding the rear entrance to Division Headquarters. I began to think the people at Division were fighting invisible ghosts. I didn't see how in the world German forces could have advanced far enough to attack St Vith from the west.

In the Command Post, Major Parker was briefing Major Goldstein and Captain Huxel, plus a hand full of Non-Coms, on how to travel to a bivouac area east of Bovigny. He advised them to move out as quickly as possible, and move the Battalion in small elements. They were to go through the villages of Poteau, Petit Their, Vielsalm, cross the Salm River, turn south and proceed through Salmchateau, and on to Bovigny. Once there Major Goldstein, with the first element, should find a suitable bivouac area between Bovigny and the Salm River. They should post a road guard to direct other 589th vehicles into the bivouac area. Major Parker emphasized he would be riding in the last vehicle. If he did not make it to the bivouac area, of course Major Goldstein would be in charge.

Major Parker was our operations officer and I was accustomed to hearing his very specific and thorough briefings. In civilian life, Major Parker was an engineer, and his briefings were always structured like he was explaining how to construct a bridge, or something of that nature. But in this briefing, I was surprised that I had not seen our CO, Lieutenant Colonel Kelly, because the Colonel always participated in briefings of this

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nature and I wondered why he was not there. Frank Tacker answered my question.

Lieutenant Colonel Kelly had left the first position two days ago to go forward and check on the infantry situation. He and his driver had not returned and no one had seen them since. This news came like a sledge hammer to my guts. It never occurred to me that anything bad could happen to the Colonel!

(Three)

In Bivouac - near Bovigny, Belgium, 1000 Hour

Compared to the move to Recht, the move to our new bivouac position was easy. Day light hours, better roads, and less traffic all helped. All vehicles, weapons and personnel reached the new bivouac area without incident. Major Parker ordered Captain Huxel to reconnoiter the road system west of Bovigny to select defensive positions while he contacted Division Headquarters to advise them where the Battalion was currently located. Before the Captain could leave the temporary Command Post, the Major said, "Hold it George, there has been another change in plans."

Additional conversation with Division resulted in a heated debate, but finally the weary Major terminated the conversation with a terse, "WILCO and OUT!" He turned to

Captain Huxel and said, "Our new mission is to defend Joubieval and Baraque de Fraiture. We will have to split what is left of the men and equipment into two groups." This turn of events was too much for me to understand. I left the temporary Command Post, went to the Command Post GMC truck, sat in the cab, and talked to the driver, Bob Hunt. Neither of us could understand this order, or who would go where. As it turned out, Bob Hunt went to defend Joubieval and I to defend Baraque de Fraiture.

THE OD YEARS: WWII AMERICANA

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE ARDENNES OFFENSIVE - DAY 4

Baraque de Fraiture was not even a village, it was merely an intersection of two roads about one mile from the small village of Fraiture, Belgium. A good secondary road, running east from the Salm River at Salmchateau, crossed a main north-south highway, known as N-15, at Baraque de Fraiture. N-15 crossed the Ourthe River at Hoffalize and was the main highway running north to the city of Liege, Belgium. Hitler had designated Liege as a main military objective for his armies to capture on their march to Antwerp and to the sea. Hitler's time-table called for Liege to fall within forty-eight hours. Two reinforced German Divisions, the 2nd SS Panzer Division and the 9th SS Panzer Division, totaling approximately 30,000 highly trained and well equipped troops, had to pass through the Baraque de Fraiture area to accomplish this objective. Liege did not fall on 18 December 1944 as Hitler had scheduled. In fact, Liege was never entered by German armed forces during the Battle of the Bulge.

Major Arthur C. Parker, III, an engineer from Alabama in civilian life, established a road block at Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium, with the assistance of Major Elliott Goldstein, a distinguished corporate attorney from Atlanta, Georgia, with less than 100 men on 19 December 1944. The majority of the American troops that held the crossroads at Baraque de Fraiture were from the 589th Field Artillery Battalion, however, due to Major Parker's strong leadership and personal courage, he inspired stragglers from other units to stand and fight with the men of the 589th, and deny this crossroad to Hitler's finest troops for almost five days. Major Parker was severely wounded during this prolonged holding action and many US soldiers were wounded, captured, or killed. Subsequently Major Parker was decorated for valor by the Belgium and American governments and received a Purple Heart for his wounds. The 589th Field Artillery Battalion was awarded a Unit Citation by the French Government in honor of it's brilliant five day holding action at Baraque de Fraiture and the Belgian Government has erected a magnificent memorial to all of the brave men who fought there. The battle for the crossroads at Baraque de Fraiture is now referred to, in military and historical writings, as "The Battle for Parker's Cross Roads," a fitting tribute to a gallant citizen soldier.

(One)
Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium - 19 December 1944, 1400 Hours

Once at Baraque de Fraiture, I could not think of the cross roads as a prime piece of real estate worth fighting for. We were told to expect overwhelming odds and were ordered to deny the crossroads to the enemy for, "As long as humanly possible." This seemingly insignificant "X" shaped crossroad, sitting in the middle of the XVIII Airborne Corps area was the responsibility of the 82nd Airborne Division to hold and defend. The problem, the entire 82nd Airborne Division had no reserves and was completely committed, already fighting valiantly trying to contain the advancing German 1st, 2nd,

and 9th SS Panzer Divisions in other locations.

To make things worse, Kampfgruppe Peiper, was still a serious threat, having been identified as the German unit responsible for the horrendous Malmedy massacre. This German 'Battle Group' was rumored to contain American (not English) speaking German soldiers dressed in American uniforms, carrying American arms, and riding in American vehicles. These members of Kampfgruppe Peiper were specifically ordered and trained to disrupt Allied lines of supply and communications, to create havoc by changing road signs, to kill American stragglers, and to assassinate high ranking Allied officers, including the Allied Supreme Commander, General Dwight David Eisenhower.

Although we did not know it at the time, General Gavin, Commanding Officer of the 82nd Airborne Division had no troops available to block highway N-15 East of Manhay, Belgium. Simply put, that is why the battered remnants of the 589th Field Artillery Battalion were sent to Baraque de Fraiture - we could no longer function as a field artillery battalion, and we were expendable! We were expected to delay the Krauts until US Armored reinforcements could be brought in. Our mission was to buy time! Only the two Majors understood this, the rest of us expected to fire a few 105mm rounds at the advancing enemy and then withdraw. This was the only thing we had done so far in this lousy war.

Baraque de Fraiture was only a road intersection in the form of an "X" located in open farm land, a clearing in the dense Ardennes Forest about the size of ten or twelve football fields. Dotting these fields were about five structures - a Country Inn and two sturdy stone farm houses with out-buildings. The two roads actually crossed on the

crest of a wind blown knoll at an elevation of 2,200 feet, the second highest point in the Ardennes Forest. The area offered almost no shelter from the frigid cold, fierce biting wind, and deep snow. It was obvious the occupants of these homes were long gone. The buildings contained minimal furniture but the out-buildings contained live and healthy milk cows, with well stocked hay lofts. So far everything about this war had seemed strange to me. We had been fighting like Infantry and Tank Destroyers. Except for a brief period of time the firing batteries had yet to function as we were trained, as a field artillery unit. The 589th Field artillery Battalion entered the 'Battle of the Bulge' with twelve 105mm howitzers three days ago - we now had three. During the first three days of the 'Battle of the Bulge' our five hundred troops had atrophied to about two hundred. Three hundred of our men had been either wounded, captured, or killed. Only one half of the remaining men in the battalion, four officers and less than one hundred men were here at Baraque de Fraiture, the others dispatched to Hell-and-Gone on another mission impossible. Our Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas P. Kelly, Jr. was missing in action, as were many of the other battalion officers. We had yet to advance, only withdraw. Yes indeed, this was truly a strange war to me!

Only the two Majors seemed to understand the big picture. They were everywhere - checking weapons emplacements, giving instructions and advice, and making certain we were dedicated to holding this important ground. They kept us busy! We, the troops, did not have time to philosophize or complain. We were cold, wet, and tired, and we were apprehensive about the future, but they kept us too busy to realize it.

Major Parker established the Command Post in the largest stone building located

near the intersection of the two roads. Telephone lines were laid to each of the three howitzer sections and outpost positions. Radio communications were established with the 106th Infantry Division Headquarters in St Vith, but our radio net was not very reliable for many reasons. Listening and observation posts were established to our east on the road to Vielsalm, and to the south on the road to Houffalize. Major Parker expected strong enemy pressure from each direction and wanted advance notice when it came. In the Command Post, Staff Sergeant Frank Tacker organized the message center, assigned radio and switchboard duties among the men, and asked me to organize the fire direction center and firing charts while he updated the situation maps.

Two officers and Sergeant Barney Alford commanded the three howitzers and received instructions from Major Parker on howitzer locations, fields of fire, the types of ammunition to prepare, the locations of the listening and observation posts, and where the local perimeter of defense was to be established. Sergeant Alford's crew, which already had tank kills to it's credit, was assigned to cover the road going toward Houffalize. Captain Arthur C. Brown, the former "B" battery Commander who escaped from the Germans at Schoenberg, was assigned to command the howitzer which covered the road going toward Vielsalm. The third howitzer was assigned to Lieutenant Thomas J. Wright from Service Battery, and was positioned to fire to the west, in order to cover what was expected to be our weakly defended rear.

Captain George Huxel was assigned the responsibility of establishing the listening posts and the perimeter defense against possible infantry penetration. Major Elliott Goldstein shared over-all command responsibility with Major Parker.

The perimeter defenses, located in the cleared fields around the road intersection, faced densely wooded areas of the surrounding Ardennes Forest. This defense was manned by cold, uncomfortable, and uneasy artillery men, equipped with small arms, machine guns, hand grenades, and bazookas, who were expected to perform like trained Infantry troops. Digging protective fox holes and slit trenches in the hard frozen ground was almost impossible. The only other alternative available consisted of wooden logs. Everyone not on duty at the Command Post spent much of the night felling trees, chopping away limbs, cutting logs, and reinforcing the defensive line and the howitzer positions. Once a position was deemed secure, the men assigned to the position rapidly spread shelter-half's and tarps over the logs to protect both men and equipment from the lightly falling snow. Within a short period of time these positions were perfectly camouflaged because they became totally covered with snow and blended perfectly into the heavy snow which covered the fields.

By midnight things had settled down to a routine in the Command Post. Frank Tacker had assigned me to the 2000 to 0200 hours shift. The men assigned to the 0200 to 0800 hours shift had crawled into their bed rolls several hours ago to get some well-earned sleep. We had assembled a folding cot in the CP for the Majors. Since no one knew what was going to happen, Major Parker, the senior officer now on duty, decided he would cat-nap on the cot in the CP when, and if, he got a chance.

Shortly after midnight I plugged into the "A" Battery jack on the field switchboard and gave the ringing crank a turn. Immediately a husky voice answered, "Sergeant Alford."

"Barney, this is Randy. What's going on over there?"

"Jesus Christ Randy, you scared the shit out of me. I thought this call would be something important."

"No, it's not important, I just wanted to know if you guys were dug-in and ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Hell, I don't know what's going on any more than you do Barney, Division can't tell us anything! Major Parker doesn't know too much himself. All the Major tells us is that holding this cross road is important to the Allies and we will deny the Germans access to this area as long as we can. What ever that means."

"Randy, if it was up to me to deny the Germans the use of this intersection, I'd take a few thousand pounds of explosives and blow the damned thing to kingdom come. Then I'd get the hell out of here. How about that approach?"

"Sounds good to me Barney, I think I'll put you in charge."

My conversation with Barney was cut short when Tacker asked, "Randy, who are you talking to?"

As I was knocking down the switchboard connection I told Barney, "I've got to cut out now, Tacker wants me for something. I'll try to get over to see you in the morning."

To answer Tacker's question, I explained, "I was just talking to Sergeant Alford in 'A' Battery."

Before Tacker could reply, Major Parker interrupted, "How are they getting along at the howitzer positions Sergeant Pierson?"

"Major Parker, they are doing OK, Sergeant Alford is griping about several things and you know what they say about griping GIs - they are OK. It's when they stop griping you have to worry."

"Yes Sergeant Pierson, I believe I have heard that saying before. Sergeant Tacker it might be wise for you to call the other two howitzer positions and the listening posts to see how they are getting along. In the meantime, I'm going to try and get a little rest. I really do not expect enemy activity before 0400 hours. If I am not awake by then, please awaken me. Do you understand Sergeant Tacker?"

"Yes Sir! If anything new comes in from Division do you wish to be disturbed?"

"By all means."

THE OD YEARS: WWII AMERICANA

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE ARDENNES OFFENSIVE - DAY 5

(One)

Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium - 589th FA Bn Command Post

0800 Hours, 20 December 1944

Private First Class Lemley threw his bedroll on the floor next to where I was sleeping and softly said, "Sarge, I'm sorry, but it's time to get up." After receiving no response, he added in a louder voice, "Sarge, if you want something hot to eat, you'd better get up and get going!"

To my sleep fogged brain, these were magic words, however it took a lot of willpower just to sit up in my bedroll. After debating with myself over whether to get up or not, I finally realized it was time for me to start my next six hour tour in the Command Post. I started wiggling my shoulders free from the sleeping bag which was wrapped

inside my woolen GI blankets. The cold air of the unheated room made me shudder and prompted me to dig quickly into the sleeping bag and retrieve my already warm field jacket and slip it on - so much for my top half. Dressing the bottom half of my body was more complicated. Even though we all had well insulated sleeping bags, we slept almost fully clothed. We had learned to keep most of our cloths on for several reasons. First, the weather was hovering between 15 and 20 degrees below freezing at night. Second, none of the rooms where we had slept so far had been heated, and only a fool would want to put frozen clothing on over a warm body, fresh out of a sleeping bag. And third, but certainly not last, I did not want to take time to dress in case we had to leave the building

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quickly. I had already been left once, and the memory of having to leave Brownie was still fresh on my mind. One experience like that was enough for me!

My procedure, when getting ready to retire, was to place my legs partially into my sleeping bag, un-blouse my outer fatigue pants by pulling the legs from under the Government Issue (GI) condoms I had tied into a circle, like a rubber band, around the top of both boots. I would then roll the condom onto the toe of each boot, leaving them there so I would not lose them while sleeping. I then unlaced and removed my boots, removed my damp socks, massaged both feet to restore circulation, and put on the dried pair of socks I had previously left in the bed roll. Both the muddy boots and the damp socks were then moved to the foot of the sleeping bag to dry and to be kept warm. This foot care was important to prevent trench foot and/or frost bite, unfortunately, during combat all nights were not spent in buildings out of the weather, consequently many combat troops suffered from one or both of these conditions during the bitter European winter of 1944-45. Unfortunately this Sergeant was one of those GIs!

Of course the reverse was true when I extricated myself from a sleeping bag. While still sitting, I would reach into the sleeping bag, straighten my socks, tuck the ankles of my long johns into each sock, roll my olive drab woolen pants leg around each ankle and tuck then into the top of each sock With my underclothing firmly in place, I would don my boots, lace them, roll the condom up to ankle height and blouse my fatigue pants under the restraining condom. Most combat soldiers used some variation of these dressing and undressing procedures, if not they would ultimately get caught in some kind of an emergency with their 'pants down.'

As I was dressing, Lemley had already snuggled into his sleeping bag and I could hear him muttering something about early morning visitors, but he was almost asleep and I didn't really understand what he said.

. For me, the short sleep had been deep, but quite restless. I thought I remembered hearing sounds of motors running and of tracked vehicles moving on brittle ice. I also seemed to remember hearing loud and excited conversations, but I assumed all these things happened in a dream. The reality of fragrant coffee aroma drifting into the room was the catalyst I needed to get me up and into the Command Post. There the thing that attracted my attention most were the changes which had occurred during my six hour absence. There was a cheery small fire burning in the fire place, a pot of coffee was heating over the fire, and Tacker had just started to fry some canned bacon in an old mess kit. As I looked around the CP, I noticed three non-coms I had never seen before - they were engaged in conversation with Major Parker. On the floor, beside the fire place, I noticed an open cardboard carton marked, US ARMY - 10 in 1 RATIONS. To attract attention as I entered the CP, I cleared my throat and slammed the door. Hearing the door open and shut, Major Parker turned and half said and half asked, "Sergeant Pierson,

nice of to join us. Did you rest well last night?" Before I could comment he continued, "Freshen up and wash your mess kit. Sergeant Tacker has volunteered to fix breakfast." My glance at the 10 and 1 RATION carton on the floor prompted the Major to continue again, "The 10 in 1s are complements of Staff Sergeant William Jones of the 643rd Tank Destroyer Battalion. Sergeant Jones, meet Sergeant Pierson."

Staff Sergeant Jones extended a muscular hand and explained he had donated the

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rations to the cause, provided he and his men could chow-down with us. The Major seemed delighted to have added four, 3 inch, high velocity, antitank guns and their crews to his defense forces.

The other two non-coms had arrived in a light tank, in the dark of the early morning hours, low on gas, and with a screwed-up radio. They were members of the 87th Reconnaissance Squadron who had been sent toward Houffalize to make contact with the point elements of the advancing German Panzer Divisions. They had made contact, but could not report the point of contact to the Squadron Commander due to their dead radio. Not knowing what to do, they maintained contact with the advancing Germans almost all night, while trying to fix their radio. When they arrived at Baraque de Fraiture, which was occupied by friendly forces, they decided to stop, refuel, and see if they could find someone to repair their radio. The Major had convinced them that under the circumstances it was better for them to join us than to be running abound the Kraut infested countryside by themselves. After introducing myself and talking to the Recon men, I didn't think Major Parker had to give them a hard sell to remain with us, they appeared willing to become a part of our group.

One of the things I found interesting about the Recon men was the fact that their mission was to locate the enemy, report the position of the enemy, and to rapidly disengage from the enemy. They were not trained to stand and slug-it-out. Having faced superior German Armor only hours earlier on the road to Houffalize, they had parked their light tank behind the stone farm house so it could not be seen by anyone approaching from that direction.

The field telephone connecting the CP and one of the listening posts rang and interrupted our conversation at 0900 hours. I answered the phone and was surprised to be talking to my buddy, John Schaffner from "A" Battery. Schaffner had good news, he wanted to report to Major Parker that four half-tracks from the 203rd Anti-Aircraft Battalion were on the way to the Command Post. They had been kicked out of their position on a hill west of Houffalize by enemy infantry and armor. Their senior man, a Staff Sergeant, wished to speak to an officer. I thanked John, hung up, and passed this information to Majors Parker and Goldstein. Immediately the two Majors started discussing arguments on how to convince the 'Ack-Ack' men to join the holding action, and how best to utilize them and their tremendous firepower if they agreed to stay.

I was watching from a window in the farm house when the four half-tracks arrived. A Staff Sergeant exited the lead vehicle and reported to the waiting officers with a snappy hand salute. It was impossible for me to hear the heated conversation which followed. Gradually the conversation became more calm and as I left the window to answer the CP switchboard, all three heads had started nodding agreement. The call was from a Lieutenant Colonel at the 106th Infantry Division Headquarters who demanded to speak with the officer in charge. As Major Parker returned from the road to take the call, Major Goldstein left in the lead half-track with the 'Ack-Ack' Staff Sergeant, headed for the perimeter defense line, followed by the other three half-tracks.

Three of the half-tracks carried four .50 caliber machine guns mounted in a powered turret. The fourth was equipped with a rapid firing 37 millimeter anti-aircraft gun. Although designed to repel low flying aircraft, the quad .50 caliber machine guns,

mounted in a motorized turret, was a devastating weapon for use against foot troops and even lightly armored vehicles. These four weapons systems would be a welcome addition to our defense capability. I was not as certain about the worth of the 37 millimeter gun. To me it had limited capability against anything but non-armed vehicles, never-the-less, these four vehicles and crews added substantial fire power to our cross roads defense. Major Goldstein and Captain Huxel were building quite an effective defensive perimeter.

At noon, the Command Post crew was treated to a 10 in 1 Dinner. Not only were the rations provided by the Recon crew, but the Recon men also prepared the hot portion of the meal on their portable gasoline burning, single burner stove. I considered this meal quite a treat when compared to the "C" type rations we had been eating for several days. The Recon Sergeant said this was his way of repaying the 589th Field Artillery men for fixing his radio and giving him enough gas to make it back to his unit. Once their radio became operational, the Recon Sergeant made contact with his Squadron Commander who gave him instructions to remain in place until the point of the advancing German forces reached Baraque de Fraiture, then report this fact to him and quickly withdraw to Samree, Belgium.

The remainder of my on-duty shift passed quickly, but I was glad to see the replacement shift start drifting in at 1400 hours. After briefing my relief, Dell Miller, I made my way across the icy Liege Highway, N-15, to visit with Sergeant Barney Alford and his 105mm howitzer crew. They were a sorry looking bunch of soldiers, dirty uniforms and dirty faces, but they were in good spirits and glad to see me.

Barney turned to his on-duty crew and half-heartedly commanded, "Ten Hut! We are about to be inspected by some gold-brick Sergeant from Headquarters Battery. You can tell he is from headquarters, note the clean uniform, the clean shaven face, and the lack of mud on his boots." This type of joking seemed to please his Cannoneers and tended to ease the obvious tension in each man's mind. Suddenly turning serious, Barney asked, "Randy, when will the main show begin?"

"Barney, I don't know, We have two guys from the 87th Reconnaissance Squadron at the Command Post now. They played tag almost all night with German infantry and panzers between here and Houffalize. They thought the Kraus would be here before now."

"I wish something would happen soon, me and the boys don't want to sit here like ducks on a small pond. That's what we are Randy, just sitting ducks, and ole buddy, you are sitting on the same pond."

"Yea, I know! No one wants to be a sitting duck, but right now, I'd rather be a sitting duck than a dead duck! Maybe the Krauts have run out of gasoline. The Recon tank was running on fumes when it pulled into the CP early this morning. Maybe the Krauts will change their minds and go home. Who knows what will happen? I wouldn't blame them if they go home. This frigging cold weather makes me want to go home!"

"Well, let me tell you something Randy, if I had my choice, I'd damned well rather be back in Florida. If I ever get back home, I swear to God, I'll never leave again. I didn't know how good I had it. This is a TARFU (Things Are Really Fucked Up) situation."

"Barney, changing the subject, is today the 19th or the 20th of December?"

"Why do you ask? What in the hell difference does it make?"

"December the 19 is my birthday."

One of Barney's crew chimed in, "Yesterday was the 19th. How old were you Sergeant Pierson?"

"Yesterday I became a man, I was 21 years old. Now I can vote, get drunk legally, and screw around with women of the night. Right now I vote to have a drink and celebrate becoming a man."

Barney agreed, "Under the circumstances, I think we should celebrate." Then disappeared into the log covered dug-out beside the howitzer. He reappeared, waving a bottle of Cognac in his glove covered hand. His white teeth contrasting sharply with his surrounding, three day growth of beard, as he smiled and invited us into the dug-out..

"Come on in Randy, the drinks are on me."

It didn't take long to finish the Cognac and declare the bottle to be a 'Dead Soldier.' The Cognac was surprisingly smooth and went down easily, straight from the bottle. Slowly the conversation turned to more pleasant things and our current concerns started to fade. Then the telephone rang.

Barney answered the phone and we all listened as he grunted, "Yep, yep, I understand, WILCO (Will Comply)." He handed the phone to a crew member and said, "Stay on the phone, we've got to prepare for a fire mission. I don't have the full details yet." He then instructed the rest of the crew to remove the protective tarp from the howitzer, un-case four rounds of High Explosive shells, open four time fuses, and prepare

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to shift trails. He then turned to me and said, "Randy, this is crazy! The 87th Recon Squadron Commander in Samree just called his tank, you know, the one parked by the CP, and said one of his Recon crews reported spotting enemy infantry approaching the village of Samree from the north. The Squadron Commander said he had an officer with the Recon crew who could adjust artillery fire. He asked if the 589th could provide him with some anti-personnel fire. The Recon Sergeant at the CP relayed this request to Major Parker and the Major has agreed to provide them artillery support."

"What is so strange about that? That is the business we are in. We provide anti-personnel fire all the time."

"Wake up Pierson, my howitzer is deployed to provide fire to the south and east, Samree is west of us. If the Recon people are right, we now have Krauts on three sides of us. We may damned well be surrounded."

"Holy Shit, you are right Barney, we probably are surrounded. That is just great! What in the hell comes next. How do we get out of Baraque de Fraiture? Things are getting complicated! It looks like the 'Fat Lady' is about to sing."

Charlie Fairchild stuck his head out of the dug-out and yelled, "Sergeant Alford, fire direction just told us to relax. They expect the first enemy contact to come from the direction of Houffalize, that is our area of responsibility. The Major has assigned another howitzer the mission to fire in Samree. We are to remain in place."

Barney nodded his head to acknowledge he understood and told the Cannoneers to replace the tarp over the howitzer and re-case the ammunition and fuses. Standing in the cold and snow, we discussed the implications of our situation, finally agreeing that

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neither of us knew what to expect. I thanked Barney for the Cognac and the party. Our future seemed very uncertain as we shook hands and I departed for the Command Post. On the way back to the CP I heard a howitzer fire the first round of the Samree

mission. Many things were going through my mind. As Barney would say, at least we're doing something. The Cognac was good and made me feel better, but it didn't kill the cold. I started thinking, "Happy Birthday to Me. Yesterday I became a man. What is going to happen if we really are surrounded? How in the hell did we get into this mess anyway? How do we get out of it?" My mind would not stop asking questions, but it never received one single answer.

Finally I made up my mind - to Hell with it all, I'm going to take a nap when I get back to the CP, I don't give a damn about this war. I am not responsible for this war until I go back on duty at 2000 hours.

(Two)

Command Post, 589th Field Artillery Battalion - Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium
20 December 1944 - 2000 Hours

My buddy, Sergeant Dell Miller, the non-com I was to relieve in fire direction was so keyed-up he did not want to be relieved. The news, or more accurately, the rumors from different sources concerning the overall situation contradicted each other. The situation map reflected these contradictions as I tried to sort through various military symbols placed on the map with different colored grease pencils. Black for us, and Red for the enemy, it had no Black line or Red line, representing opposing forces, with a no-man's land in between. The situation map was now covered with Black and Red circles, indicating who controlled the territory
within each circle. I had never seen anything

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like this before - two forces opposing each other, but no front lines!

Dell said if I was trying to make sense out of the map, "Forget it!" His appraisal of the situation was the only road in the area still under American control was the road to Manhay. In his opinion, that road would not remain in our hands for long, and if we lost control of that road, he reminded me of something I already knew. We would get no more re-supply of food, gasoline, or ammunition. This was pretty scary stuff!

In the meantime the 106th Infantry Division Headquarters continued to notify us , by radio, how important it was to deny this main road to the enemy for as long as possible. Apparently Division expected us to conduct a John Wayne, Hollywood type shootout to the last man. This approach did not appeal to me at all! I asked Dell about the short Samree fire mission during the late afternoon hours. He said it was a strange mission. To begin with, we had no firing charts prepared to shoot behind us, so he and Frank Tacker made up a firing chart quickly, using information from the 1/50,000 scale situation map we had on the wall. Miraculously, the 87th Recon officer observed the first round as the shell burst in the target area. The forward observer then asked for a relatively small adjustment for the second round. When it exploded, he made no changes and asked us to "Fire For Effect" on the third round. After a four round volley from two howitzers, he reported scattered enemy infantry dead and the remainder in retreat. With the crisp orders: "Cease Fire" - "End Of Mission" - "Mission Accomplished." Miller said the entire mission had been fired as though a trained Artillery Officer had been the forward observer. The only deviation from SOP (Standard Operating Procedures) occurred when the Recon Officer added, "Thanks for your help, 589th!"

The 87th Reconnaissance Squadron evaluated this enemy action not as a combat patrol, but an intelligence gathering patrol to determine if Samree was occupied and defended by American troops. The Krauts obtained an answer, however, but how well

defended, or for how long Samree was to be occupied by American troops remained to be seen,

Dell's adrenaline flow finally started to slow and fatigue began to set in. He made it perfectly clear where he would be bedded down and insisted I get him up in a hurry if things heated up during the night. I gave him my solemn word I would.

When I reported to Major Parker, I noticed he also looked tired and the worse for wear. He had been carrying a huge load since we lost Lieutenant Colonel Kelly, the Battalion Commander. After briefing me on the situation in general, the best he could, he suddenly changed the subject to Lieutenant Colonel Kelly. He was concerned that we had not seen nor heard of the Colonel in four days now. The Major had served with the Colonel for the entire time we had trained as a Battalion, they were good friends, and had tremendous respect for each other. The thought of the Colonel being killed, wounded, or captured distressed us both. Terminating our conversation with a desperate shake of his head, Major Parker walked to his cot, sat down as if in meditation, and then slowly lowered himself into the prone position. I could tell he was worn out by his awesome responsibility, the loss of many friends, and the terrible uncertainty of our mission. After lying there for only a few moments he finally slipped into a deep and merciful sleep.

With only two other enlisted men on duty with me in the Command Post, I suddenly realized I was the senior person awake, and the fact that I was 'in charge'

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finally sunk in. The three of us stayed busy for the next hour and a half, listening to radio traffic between units, performing the normal housekeeping chores, and answering the CP switchboard. At 2330 hours, the EE8A field telephone rang that connected the CP to the listening post in the woods adjacent to the Houffalize highway. The hushed voice of John Schaffner from "A" Battery whispered, "I've got to talk to the person in charge at the CP, right now!"

As I took the telephone handset from the operator, I answered, "Sergeant Pierson, what's up?"

"Randy, I don't know what's up, but we hear noises like people moving along the hard-road. Right now I can hear Krauts talking and laughing. I can't see them in detail, but they seem to be pushing bicycles."

"What else are they doing, John?"

"Nothing, just walking and talking. They are headed toward the CP. They act like they're going to a picnic or something."

"Is it only foot soldiers, or do they have some type of motor support?"

"I don't think they have any support at all, Randy. They're still headed toward you folks. Maybe they are lost."

"Schaffner, hold on a minute, I've got to wake up the Major and try to get things sorted our. You just hold on."

"Sarge, I'll hold on, but do not ring me back under any circumstances. The Krauts would hear the ring and know exactly where I am. They would be all over us like a coat of paint."

"Don't worry partner, I understand, just hang in there, I'm getting Major Parker."

The instant I touched his shoulder, Major Parker was wide awake. He asked me to assess the situation and I repeated what John Schaffner had told me. The Major thought briefly and said he did not wish to endanger the listening post personnel nor reveal the locations of his howitzers. He opted to utilize the quad .50 caliber machine guns mounted on the anti-aircraft half-track covering the Houffalize road. As the Major

uttered this statement, the telephone operator on duty was calling to alert the Ack-Ack crew. The Anti-Aircraft Sergeant had two questions, how many enemy personnel were approaching, and at what range? Schaffner estimated about 20 enemy foot solders were some one hundred yards west of his listening post and still advancing toward the Command Post at a leisurely pace. These facts placed the enemy infantry about six hundred yards from the half-track. This information was passed to the 'Ack-Ack' crew.

In the still, cold night air, we at the CP could actually hear the distinctive, 'clack, clack - clack, clack' four times as .50 caliber cartridges were loaded into each of the air cooled anti-aircraft machine guns mounted in the half-track turret. The crew chief then reported back to the CP, "Turret ready to fire. We are aimed on target, waist high, awaiting your command to fire." At the Major's direction, I notified Schaffner we would be firing quad .50s, and other small arms down the Houffalize road. The fire would consist of four separate bursts. He and his men should stay in their holes and keep their heads down until two minutes after the fourth burst. At that time he should stick his head up and report the results of the machine gun fire.

An extremely nervous John Schaffner said, "Randy, make sure I got this straight.

Duck, four bursts, wait two minutes, then look up and report."

"You got it right partner - NOW DUCK!"

On command, the cold, black night exploded and burst into flickering orange-red light. The anti-aircraft gunner squeezed off twenty round bursts (actually eighty rounds for each burst as he was firing four machine guns) by counting the number of tracers fired. This was relatively easy for an experienced gunner because each fifth round in the ammunition belt was a tracer. He merely counted four tracers, released the firing mechanism for a count of ten, and then fired four more tracers. The gunner repeated this rhythmic sequence four times and in the process fired a total of 320 highly destructive rounds of .50 caliber slugs.

Once the firing started, Major Parker and I moved to the front of the stone building housing the CP to watch the fireworks. The muzzle flashes from the four .50 caliber machine guns silhouetted the olive drab half-track against the white snow surround it. Each muzzle burst cast eerie shadows behind tall mounds of snow and illuminated the dark tree line of the surrounding Ardennes Forrest. Cherry red tracers flew down the Houffalize road like four columns of giant lightening bugs and gracefully moved from side to side, like molten liquid from a garden hose, as the gunner gently traversed the turret to direct fire along both sides of the road. The accompanying noise level was awesome. This picture repeated itself three more times and the sight and sound was spell binding. I had difficulty in equating such a beautiful sight to the horrible death and destruction it was causing some six hundred yards from me.

As suddenly as this spectacle started, the night became black again, and the

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silence of death prevailed.

Two minutes later, Schaffner reported in over his field telephone, "Holy Shit Randy, I didn't know those quad .50s could throw out so many rounds. I could see tracers going over and could actually feel the velocity of the rounds as they passed over our hole. I could hear the Krauts running around and screaming. Those Ack-Ack guys really caught the Krauts with their pants down."

"Schaffner, have you stuck your head up yet?"

"NO WAY!"

"Can you hear anything?"

"I haven't really tried yet. Hold on a minute. I think I hear some guy down the road moaning and groaning."

"Where is he from your location?"

"I can't tell, I'm pretty deep in my hole."

"Think you can stick your head up now?"

"Are those Ack-Ack guys through shooting?"

"For right now John, yes."

It seemed like I waited forever for Schaffner to get back on the phone. When he returned, there was excitement in his voice. He reported torn up bicycles and dead bodies all over the road. There was no one standing, walking, or running on the road, and he could hear nothing moving in the forest. The only sign of life he could detect was the moaning German soldier lying on the side of the road.

"Schaffner, can you detect any movement in the direction of Houffalize?"

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"Sarge, it is spooky quiet out here. I mean real quiet. It is spooky, all I can hear is my heart beating."

"OK buddy, we won't do any more shooting, but stay put, and stay alert. I don't know whether the Major is going to send someone out to pick up the wounded Kraut or not,"

"Randy, unless my ears are playing tricks on me, I think I hear Captain Huxel out there now. Hold on and let me take another look. Sarge, I was right, warn everyone at the cross roads not to fire, the Captain and two other guys are dragging the wounded prisoner toward the CP right now."

"Thanks for the information John, I'll pass it along to Major Parker."

"Randy, before you hang up, I want to tell you I'm going to disconnect my phone."

"Schaffner, you can't do that, we might have to call you!"

"Just a damned minute Sergeant, I'm not finished. I don't want this damned thing ringing. With that patrol wiped out, somebody will probably come looking for them later on. I don't want anyone to hear my telephone ringing. I'm going to disconnect the phone lines from my EE8A and hold them in my hand. If you need to call me, crank the magneto slowly, the shock will tell me to hook up the phone line. But remember, don't turn the crank hard, these magnetos can 'bite' you. I don't want to get 'bit' and drop the line and loose it."

"OK, I get the picture John. Stay down and hang loose. If you need me, call, I'll be right here."

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Activity in the CP picked up. Major Parker was reporting to Division and all the local phones were busy, everyone wanted to know what the firing was all about and as Frank Tacker and Dell Miller entered the CP fully clothed, Captain Huxel and a medic dragged a half frozen, badly wounded, and extremely frightened German Corporal into the Command Post.

For some reason I thought of my conversation earlier in the day with Barney Alford. I was certain he felt as I did, that our position was untenable, that we had been declared expendable, and since the end was near, the 'Fat Lady' had already begun to sing!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE ARDENNES OFFENSIVE - DAY 6

(One)
Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium - 589thFA Bn
Sergeant Alford's Howitzer Section
21 December 1944 - Early Morning, Before Day Break

Although Sergeant Alford's howitzer section had not been involved in the skirmish with the German bicycle patrol last night, Barney was fully aware of what had taken place. He had not slept well last night and down deep inside he knew he and his men would be severely tested today. He detested firing his howitzer using direct fire, like an anti-tank gun. His 105mm howitzer was designed for indirect fire, not direct fire, and although his howitzer was a powerful artillery weapon, it was slow to fire when compared with the gun on a panzer, and his crew members were not protected like the members of a panzer crew. Of course, the obvious advantage a panzer mounted gun had over his howitzer was the fact that the panzer could move about swiftly, whereas his howitzer could not. He knew these facts from training, and more recently from experience in combat. However he was determined his crew would be ready for the first wave of German armor which would obviously attack our positions today..

Corporal Fairchild, the Battalion Howitzer Mechanic, had the same basic feelings. When he sensed Sergeant Alford moving about in the dark of the cramped, log covered bunker, he decided to get out of his warm sleeping bag and get dressed for action also. Soon the light produced by a gasoline lantern and the heat produced by the tiny cooking
stove, combined with the aroma of boiling coffee made the cramped bunker more

bearable. Outside however, the ammunition crates were covered by several inches of new snow and the howitzer itself, under it's protective tarp, looked like a huge, harmless mound of snow, not like a sophisticated weapon of war.

Although the black coffee was steaming hot and the "C" Rations, marked on the can as 'Eggs and Bacon,' had been heated, this combination did not make the greatest breakfast Barney and Charlie had ever eaten. The best thing you could say about the "C" Rations was they were nutritious and filling and the caffeine in the coffee helped get the ole motor started. The worst thing about getting up under these conditions is going to the latrine. Urinating through four layers of tight clothing is difficult, no mater what the length of the penis. The usual outcome produced a slight leakage down one pant leg or the other. But having a bowel movement with your bared rear-end touching the snow is, putting it lightly, not a pleasant experience in below freezing weather. Most GIs waited as long as they possibly could to take a crap. This practice, along with the heavy spices and the high protein contained in Army field rations, caused each man to generate enormous amounts of intestinal gas. Since a large volume of this intestinal gas is passed during the sleeping hours, the sleeping bags, or bed rolls, were frequently referred to as 'fart sacks.' Not necessarily a polite name, but extremely descriptive! This morning, Sergeant Alford's closed-in bunker smelled pretty rotten, giving credence to the old GI adage, "It's better to fart and bear the shame, than not to fart and bear the pain."

In normal times Charlie Fairchild, as the Battalion Artillery Mechanic, was charged with the responsibility of maintaining twelve 105mm, truck drawn, howitzers. He was now serving as a member of Barney's howitzer crew, but continued to check the

three remaining howitzers daily. In weather this cold, the main item he checked was the hydraulic fluid in the recoil mechanism. If this hydraulic fluid froze, or leaked out, the howitzer could sustain severe damage when fired, and most likely, one or more of the Cannoneers would be injured in the process. It was Fairchild's responsibility to make certain this type of accident would not happen.

Charlie Fairchild did not look forward to making his howitzer inspections this morning. The weather was particularly fowl, the three howitzer positions were widely disbursed and, it was difficult to get his 3/4 ton Dodge truck, which carried his heavy tools, close to any of these weapons. Since his truck was parked fairly close to Barney's howitzer position he decided to start his inspection tour here at first light.

Breakfast over, Barney reached into his musette bag and retrieved a partial box of hand rolled Cuban Panatela cigars. He carefully counted out four cigars, his quota for the day, looked at the almost empty box, and cursed to no one in particular, "We'd better get out of this damned position before I run out!" Muttering to himself, he returned the almost empty box to his musette bag, carefully placed three cigars into a hard plastic cigar case, stuffed the case into an inner jacket pocket, and started to light his first cigar of the day. Once the cigar was properly lit, he headed through the deep snow toward the latrine to take a good, healthy crap.

(Two)

Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium - 589th FA Bn Command Post
0530 Hours

The switchboard operator yelled, "Captain Huxel is reporting the outpost line between the Houffalize and Vielsalm roads is under heavy infantry attack." Major Parker

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looked at his wrist watch as he picked up the handset of his telephone and thought, "Jerry is right on time, exactly 0530 Hours." In his normal, unhurried, and gentle tone of voice, the Major asked Captain Huxel, "What is going on George?"

The Major had made many important decisions concerning the defense of the cross roads, but placing Captain Huxel in command of the outer perimeter defense was probably his most wise decision. Captain Huxel was by far the most physical and tough officer in the Battalion, and the men respected him for this personal toughness. His defense was well planned and potential enemy travel routes were covered by devastating and mobile firepower. The additional defensive force was not originally planned, but had been accumulated from other units passing through our road block who had been recruited by Major Parker to stand and fight with the 589th. To the less than one hundred 589th Field Artillery men and their remaining three 105mm howitzers, Captain Huxel now had four anti-aircraft half-tracks and crews from the 203rd AA Battalion, four 3 inch anti-tank guns and crews from the 643rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, and one light tank and crew from the 87th Reconnaissance Squadron. Our mission had not changed, we were to hold this open area, the size of a dozen football fields, which had been cleared from the dense Ardennes Forest years ago by Belgian farmers, for as long as possible.

While Captain Huxel was a smart man, he could not be accurately described as an intellectual. The word which described him best, was physical. At 5' 11", he weighed almost 200 pounds, all muscle, and no fat what-so-ever. An angular face topped with blond hair, a short cropped military style haircut, a crushing handshake, and penetrating sky-blue eyes, were his trade marks. The Captain had one peculiar theory which was

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unique for an officer, he felt the Army placed too much emphasis on personal hygiene and thought one bath each week was sufficient. This belief was hard for others to understand and placed him in a category by himself. Never-the-less, in combat he was truly respected by both officers and enlisted men. If you were engaged in a rough, tough street fight, you would want the Captain on your side. In my opinion we were about to be committed to the roughest and toughest pitched battle of our lives, and I was glad Captain Huxel was on my side!

Captain Huxel answered Major Parker's question in a brief and unemotional manner, "Major, the attack started with light fine from a single 60mm mortar. We have pretty well pinpointed the mortar location, but have no way to knock it out. We are receiving small arms and burp gun fire, not heavy, just enough to force us to keep our heads down. I'd estimate we are facing a reduced Company, maybe 60 or 70 people. Anything else you need to know?"

"George, is there any chance the Germans can break through our defense?"

"Major, I don't think so. They're still in the woods and don't have any punching power. To get to us they would have to advance about two hundred yards across open ground covered with deep snow. I don't think they could make it."

"What is your plan?"

"We're going to kick the shit out of them!"

"No George, I mean specifically. What about the mortar?"

"Sir, I would like for you to send me the Recon tank. The one behind the Command Post - Aw shit, excuse me Major."

After a long pause Captain Huxel returned to the telephone and continued, "We had to duck, that fucking mortar is bugging us. Major please let me use the tank, we definitely know the location of the mortar. The Kraut small arms fire can't hurt the tank. The tank crew should be able to take out the mortar easily with a couple of rounds."

"Consider it done George," the Major responded as he passed instructions to Staff Sergeant Frank Tacker, "Do you need anything else?"

"Yes Sir, we could use some 105mm rounds into the tree line directly in front of us. You know, like interdiction fire. Fuse Quick would be best. That would produce tree bursts and give the Kraut infantry something to worry about, in addition to killing some of the bastards."

"I'll give you the 105mm support very quickly. Need anything else?"

"No sir."

"Consider it done George, keep your head down and let me know if the 105mm support is effective."

Frank Tacker looked over my shoulder intently as I talked to Sergeant Alford on the telephone. "Barney, this is Randy - FIRE MISSION."

As Barney yelled "FIRE MISSION" to his howitzer crew, he said, "Go ahead Randy, what's up?"

Captain Huxel needs interdicting fire into the woods about three hundred yards in front of him. The eastern side of the perimeter in taking small arms and mortar fire."

"We can hear the firing. My howitzer can lay down direct fire into that area. You gave the mission to the right crew. We have a good field of fire in that direction."

"Barney, here are the commands, Charge 3, Shell HE, Fuse Quick, Range 600 yards, Ten Rounds at ten second intervals, Fire when ready." As an after thought, I added, "Barney, rake the area and try to get tree bursts"

"WILCO, Randy. Tell the captain to keep his head down."

Major Parker reported to Captain Huxel, "Get down and stay down, the first round is on the way, nine more to follow at 10 second intervals. At end of mission, report results."

The situation at the east perimeter had escalated into a vicious fire fight. Mostly small arms fire, but periodically punctuated with the distinctive 'crump' of exploding German 60mm mortar shells. The Germans obviously did not know how to use their mortar effectively. The rounds were landing in the open area where the men of the perimeter defense were well dug-in. The Germans appeared to want to soften up the outpost positions and were paying almost no attention to the building which contained the American Command Post, nor the half-tracks or the howitzers themselves. During the night, German troops had moved toward the cross roads from Houffalize and Vielsalm and obviously expected to encounter light, or no resistance at all.

The first ten rounds from Barney's 105mm howitzer, bursting in the trees over the heads of the advancing enemy infantry had quite a dampening effect on their attack. The sounds of battle diminished perceptibly as the Kraut soldiers scurried in search of cover. Captain Huxel reported he was pleased with the suppressing effect of the howitzer fire, but wanted to know when to expect the Recon tank. While he was still complaining about the mortar fire that harassed his men, he reported he could hear and see the Recon

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tank making its way slowly in his general direction. The tank hatch cover was open and the tank commander was visible from the shoulders up. He was receiving sporadic, but ineffective, small arms fire during the short journey which made it necessary for him to duck inside the tank's protective armor frequently, thereby slowing his progress.

An infuriated Captain Huxel called for another ten rounds of howitzer fire. These tree bursts took the remaining fight out of the now retreating German infantry. Those soldiers not killed or wounded had started a frantic and disorganized withdrawal toward the town of Vielsalm.

With no small arms fire to contend with, the Recon tank commander reached Captain Huxel without additional trouble. As the tank slowed to a halt, the Captain climbed aboard and gave the signal to proceed. In short order, the tank moved eastward on the Vielsalm road unopposed. Once on the road, the Captain told the tank gunner to "load and lock with shell HE" and be prepared to fire when the tank turned left into a cleared fire break in the forest. He explained he expected to find the mortar and crew located there. When they reached the fire break, the tank driver was going to fast and as he made the left turn the tank slid sideways on the ice. In the moment it took to get the tank under control and stopped, the gunner saw the upright mortar and the crew men. In true artillery fashion, Captain Huxel bellowed above the rumble of the engine, "Range 300, Fire When Ready!"

The 57mm, high velocity, tank gun roared, the tank chassis shook, and the fire break in front of the tank was filled with black smoke, flying snow, a perforated mortar tube, and unrecognizable body parts.

The Captain then ordered, "Fire two when ready!"

For all practical purposes, the second round was not necessary, but it too produced spectacular results. This round triggered numerous secondary explosions of the remaining enemy mortar rounds.

Captain Huxel advised the Recon Sergeant he felt the mission was successful, but the Sergeant wanted to take a look around. He armed himself, and closely followed by Captain Huxel, climbed out of the protection of the light tank. They were covered by a nervous tank gunner, who manned a light .30 caliber machine gun from the safety of the turret. The Captain collected German 'Soldiers Books' from the mutilated dead bodies while the Recon Sergeant diligently searched for war trophies.

The tank encountered no enemy fire as it returned to the cross roads at 0745 hours. The occupants of the returning tank found 589th medics tending the German wounded, they saw enemy dead lying in the snow in a row at the edge of the clearing, and witnessed the new-to-combat 589th Artillery men, fighting as infantry, actively engaged in rounding up German prisoners of war.

(Three)

Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium - 589th FA Bn Command Post
2000 Hours

We had been in hard combat for six days now, however, the battle we had experienced this morning was the most intense combat we had experienced to date. The fire fight lasted about two hours, but to the artillery men involved, it seemed like a lifetime. In addition to taking care of ourselves, we had captured twelve German

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Volksgrenadiers we must guard, four of which were wounded. We had received no serious casualties, however, three of the 589th men had received lacerations from mortar fragments. The most prevalent damage to the American troops defending the cross road consisted of frayed nerves and an uncertain future. We had been severely tested and we had prevailed. Now the enemy knew we were here and we were determined to stay. For the enemy to continue their advance toward their immediate objective, the vast Allied supply dumps near Liege, Belgium, they must exercise one of two options: either bypass us, or overwhelm us. .

There was no doubt in Major Parker's mind, we would stay, we would hold this ground as long as we could, and in the end, we would be overwhelmed because we were expendable. We were mere pawns in a gigantic, absurd, chess game, where winner takes all. He and Captain Huxel had spent all day rearranging the defense, re-establishing listening posts, and establishing a fall-back defense line to use when the enemy exerted even more pressure on the defenders later in the day. The Major felt pressure would be exerted with additional infantry, greater firepower, and armor support.

The fire direction crew on duty during the day had been busy after the morning attack. They were ready to go off duty when I reported to the Command Post. As I entered the room, Major Parker immediately cornered Frank Tacker, Dell Miller and me. The Major looked exhausted, his shoulders drooped, his face was void of expression, and he looked at us with a vacant stare. In a monotone he began, "Gentlemen, I expect all hell to break loose just before dawn tomorrow morning." He paused, as though trying to organize his thoughts, and then he
continued, "I believe the enemy will mass troops,

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armor, and artillery along the Houffalize and Vielsalm roads tonight." He paused again to let the message sink in. "We must be able to use our artillery to interdict and disrupt their assembly areas. To accomplish this, we must establish and man a forward observation post tonight." After pausing for the third time, to allow the full weight of his statement to sink in, he finally said, "I need a volunteer!"

No one spoke! The three of us looked at each other for what seemed an eternity. Still, no one spoke!

Without raising his voice, the Major repeated his request, "I need a volunteer who can adjust artillery fire."

The following silence was embarrassing, and to my utter surprise, I heard myself say in a high squeaky voice, "Major Parker, I will volunteer."

Major Parker bowed his head and said, "Sergeant Tacker, Sergeant Miller, thank you, that will be all. Sergeant Pierson, come with me, we need to talk."

Looking over an aerial photograph of the area, the Major pointed out a location, between the two roads involved, where a wire crew had run a telephone line to a fox hole hidden in thick trees. I was to take an EE8A (pronounced - Double E 8A) field telephone to that location, connect it to the line, secure myself in the fox hole, and report to fire direction when I was ready to listen and observe. I was to report enemy movement of any kind to the east or south of me, be it foot soldiers or vehicles. If my report resulted in a fire mission, I was to adjust artillery fire onto the target. Major Parker advised me I was to man this outpost until dawn, at which time I would be relieved.

This was a pretty tall order for an inexperienced Sergeant who would have limited

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visibility due to the dense trees and total darkness. On the other hand, with the supreme confidence inherent in a young, healthy, twenty-one year old male, I figured if anyone could do it, I could do it. Only this thought suppressed my fears and provided me the necessary courage to start the long, lonely walk to the observation post. All alone, just me, my EE8A, my trusty pistol, and my newly sharpened boot knife, I began walking east on the Vielsalm road. .

What lay ahead? I could only guess! The farther I walked, the more disturbed I became. All this darkness, the uncertainty, the obvious danger, and being alone, caused a nervous twitch in my left eye lid. My right hand dropped to my pistol holster and I unsnapped the protective flap. As I forced myself to keep walking, I kept asking, "Why did I volunteer?" The answer I received was always the same, "Because you are stupid! Stupid! STUPID!"

The luminous dial of my GI wrist watch indicated it was almost 2300 hours when I turned the crank on the EE8A and checked in with the fire direction center. When their telephone rang, Dell Miller answered and asked, "Randy - Are you OK?"

"So far, so good Dell. Tell the Major I'm all set, but I can't see anything. I can't hear anything either, and Dell, don't let anyone touch the crank on your phone. It's so quiet out here the Krauts could hear this damned thing ring a mile down the road."

"I'll tell the Major. Glad you made it buddy.!"

"Dell, I'm serious! You guard that damned telephone crank until I get back to the cross roads. I'm depending on you!"

"Don't sweat it Randy, I'll guard it. No one will call you."

"Dell, I'll check in with you guys every half hour, but I say it again Dell, DO NOT CALL ME!"

THE OD YEARS: WWII AMERICANA

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE ARDENNES OFFENSIVE - DAY 7

(One)
In the Ardennes Forest east of Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium
589th FA Bn Forward Observation Post
22 December 1944, 0130 Hours

"Dell, I can hear motors running every now and then. The darkness plays tricks on my eyes but I think I see a light over the tree tops every now and then. The light is hard to describe, it is very faint, just a glimmer."

"Where do you think the Krauts are?"

"About one mile east of me. Sounds like vehicles moving into a bivouac, or maybe a staging area."

"Which way do you think they are turning off of the Vielsalm road?"

"It's too dark to read a map, but I'd say they are turning south, maybe down a fire break, heading towards the Houffalize road. I can't pinpoint the sounds or the lights exactly."

"OK Randy, I'll talk to the Major. In the meantime, keep the line open, I'll need to talk to you in about one minute."

"I'll wait."

Dell was gone a long time and I hung on the line for what seemed like an hour. The EE8A telephone is equipped with a push-to-talk switch. Consequently when Dell put his receiver down, his switch was not depressed, and I could not hear what was

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going on in the Command Post. The line was totally dead, the air was getting colder, the night was moonless, I was alone, and the spooky forest was beginning to get to me. My nerves were as taut as stretched rubber bands and my straining eyes were seeing things which did not exist. Periodically I was brought back to the world of reality by the sound of a truck motor in the distance, the wind in the snow covered trees, or the occasional soft 'plop' when a clump of damp snow fell to earth from an overburdened limb.

The fox hole wasn't really large enough for me. I was starting to get leg cramps from the cold and lack of exercise and I already wished I was back with my friends at the Command Post. Why in the hell did I volunteer to come out here? I must be nuts, a candidate for a Section Eight (Mental Deficiency) Discharge.

"Randy, are you still there?"

"Of course I am! Where in the hell do you think I could go? What is going on at the CP? Did you guys take a nap?"

Ignoring all these snippy questions, Dell asked, "Can you hear increased activity east of you position?"

"No, I just hear a single motor every now and then. Sounds like a single truck, however, it may be the same truck over and over again. I don't know."

"OK, I'll tell Major Parker. He doesn't want to do anything yet. I'm going to sign off for now, be sure and check in at 0200 hours."

"Dell, I'll hang around a little bit longer, but I really want to come in. I feel like a red pimple in the middle of a big white rear-end sitting out here all by myself. And Dell, don't let anyone call me. You promised!"

"I promised, no calls you can trust me. You call us, we will not call you!"

There was nothing more to report during the calls at 0200 and 0230 hours. Time was dragging, I was very cold and uncomfortable, and it was getting difficult to stay awake. The only defense against the cold and going to sleep was body movement. I had to get out of the fox hole more frequently and exercise. For the 'umpteenth' time I looked at my GI wrist watch. The luminous dial told me it was 0250 hours. In ten minutes I had to check in with fire direction. When I did, I would tell them to notify our outposts not to shoot because I was coming in. I don't care if the Major does expect me to stay out here in this damned forest by myself until I am relieved at dawn. During my exercise session, of bends, stretches and knee lifts, I decided to make my way through the trees to the side of the road. The distance was not great. Once there I could definitely hear motorized traffic. The sounds were much louder, but not necessarily closer. As I listened more intently I could make out the distinctive sound of tracked vehicles. Apparently Jerry had been moving infantry into a staging area in trucks for two or three hours and now their supporting armor was beginning to arrive.

It was almost 0300 hours when Dell Miller answered the telephone, "Randy anything new?"

I was almost too excited to report, "I believe Jerry has dumped several truck loads of infantry into the woods about a mile east of here. Now I hear their armored support vehicles beginning to arrive. You'd better notify Major Parker."

"WILCO, hold on."

There was no mistaking the situation. Jerry was going to assault the cross roads

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at daybreak with a larger infantry force, this time supported by armor. The thought occurred to me, this really makes me a very small red pimple on a huge white rear-end. With Americans shooting at Germans over my head and the Germans fighting back, how was I supposed to get out of this fucking mess alive. One side or the other will surely kill me during the fire fight and I'll be just as dead no matter who pulls the trigger. I hope the Major will order me back to the Command Post before the shit hits the fan. If he does, with my luck, I'll probably get shot by one of the nervous 589th Cannoneers as I stumble down the road to the CP in the dark. CRAP!

My thoughts were shattered when Dell spoke into the telephone. "Randy, Major Parker wants you to adjust some artillery fire. We are preparing the gun data right now."

"Dell, I can't see anything because of the trees. How can I adjust fire when I can't see the target area or the shell burst?"

"We know you can't see the target area, just do the best you can. We are going to adjust with Shell WP (White Phosphorus) which will create a lots of light and maybe set something on fire, or maybe create a secondary explosion."

"Hey, pretty good thinking pal. Really sharp! Who thought of that?"

"I don't want to brag but it was your ole buddy Dell. Just taking care of a friend."

"That won't take care of me, but maybe the artillery fire will help."

When Dell reported, "First round on the way," I could actually hear a 105mm howitzer fire and realized it was not one of ours, but belonged to another Field Artillery Battalion located much to the west of the cross roads, and made a mental note to ask

Dell what outfit was firing the mission for me. This question disappeared quickly when I left

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the protection of my fox hole to observe the burst of the white phosphorous round as it burst in the forest east of me. The flash was brilliant against the black sky and plainly visible to my naked eye.

"Did you see the first round Randy?"

"As plain as day."

"How do you sense the round?"

"Hang on Dell, I want to listen for a minute before I make up my mind. I want to know if the first round attracted the Krauts attention, or if it is so far away they aren't paying any attention to it."

Apparently the bursting White Phosphorous round attracted the enemies attention. From the sounds involved, both truck and tank motors were being started. In their haste to move out of the target area, some enemy drivers committed an unpardonable sin, they broke black-out discipline and turned on their head lights. From my vantage point, I came to the conclusion the first round of WP burst beyond the lights on the moving vehicles, which were moving slowly to my left.

I reached for the field telephone at the parapet of my fox hole and spoke into the transmitter in a low voice, "Miller?"

"Yep."

"The round is 400 over and 200 right."

"To enable me to follow what was going on in fire direction, Miller left the push-to-talk button of his EE8A in the ON position. I heard him as he made the corrections to the fire direction specialists, "Down 400, Left 200."

Things were starting to happen which made me forget the discomfort caused by the cold and eased the tensions caused by fear. Adrenaline began to flow and fight overcame the flight characteristics of the 'Fight or Flight Syndrome.' What I was doing now was one of the things I was taught to do in training. It was almost like being on the firing range back in Camp Atterbury. In short order, I received the report from Miller, "On the way." As I heard the swishing 105mm round go over my head, I thought, the howitzer crew firing this mission is pretty sharp, then my mind was brought back to focus by the brilliant flash of the second round bursting in the Kraut assembly area. My perception of where the second round burst seemed to be between me and the moving vehicle lights. We apparently had achieved what a good forward observer strives for - a bracket - one round short of the target, and one round beyond the target. Once the target is 'bracketed' you know it is located between the established firing data. The next sensing would ask the fire direction crew to split the bracket and "Fire for Effect." The only thing I now had to adjust for was for the slow movement of the vehicles to my left.

"Dell, try 200 Short, 200 Right, Change shell to HE (High Explosive), Fuse Quick."

Through his EE8A I heard Dell make the corresponding corrections, "Up 200, Left 200, Shell HE, Fuse Quick."

My request for a change in ammunition from White Phosphorous to High Explosive was more of an educated guess than a mere whim. After-the-fact, I thought it was going to be a foolish request. First, I thought I would not be able to observe the

bursts of the HE shells through the trees, and second, the flight characteristics of the two

shells were different. Logically I thought I had wasted a round, but more important, I felt I had given Jerry more time to flee and/or seek cover. With these thoughts running through my mind, I heard Miller report, "On the Way."

The third round of my adjustment burst in the target area, I heard it, but I could not see it. What I did see was a great ball of fire, surrounded by the low hanging clouds caused by the two previous bursts of white phosphorus shells. The target area now looked like heat lightening during a stormy night back home in Florida. Following this visual display came a second explosion which made the sound of the shell burst seem puny by comparison. The force of this explosion was so powerful I could actually feel the force of the explosion push upon my chest. Following this secondary explosion, two shafts of light rose above the crest of the tree line at a crazy angle. These two beams of light were stationary and clearly visible as they penetrated the haze and smoke caused by the previous WP shells. The secondary explosion had upended an enemy vehicle whose headlights had become the guiding beacons for the rain of 105mm shells which followed.

My sensing of this round was short and exhilarating, "Direct Hit - Fire for Effect!" As an after thought I added most unprofessionally, "Hit them with everything you've got, including the kitchen sink." Suddenly the still night was filled with explosions. Behind me the howitzers were firing rapidly and the target area in front of me had become an audible and visual mosaic of bursting artillery shells and multi-colored flashes. Entirely caught-up in the excitement of the moment, I finally heard Miller's voice on the telephone, which was still held to my ear, "Fire for Effect is Complete - Please Report the Results."

Still excited, I dropped the expected forward observer protocol and responded, "It looks like we did a lot of damage. Of course I don't know how much. We got at least one good secondary explosion and I know we got at least one vehicle. I cannot assess any other damage from actual observation because I can't see anything."

"Randy, do you require additional fire upon the target?"

"Dell, please do not give the firing battery an 'End of Mission' yet. I need more time to listen for movement. I'm going to move out onto the road and try to take a look at what the Krauts are doing. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

"OK Randy, I won't release the firing battery until I hear from you again."

The view looking east on the Vielsalm road was not good because of the curves which followed the contours of the hilly terrain. Through the now quiet night I could see no lights, other than the flickering orange/red glow caused by something burning in the distance. The slanted beacons, which had marked the target area, were gone, either extinguished by the artillery barrage or by the hand of some brave and unknown enemy soldier. Not a trace of vehicular movement could be detected, but I had a feeling, a strong instinctive feeling, that there was silent foot movement, that I could neither hear nor see, along the road and in the forest. Instinct and common sense moved me back into the forest and to the cover of my fox hole where the feeling of movement to the east of me grew even stronger. My heart began to pound, my mouth went dry, and I breathed in short, quick intervals. The adrenaline was beginning to flow again. This time, would it be fight or flight?

After minutes of waiting and listening there was still nothing tangible to guide

me, but I had a strange feeling that I was being hunted. Now I knew how a deer must feel as it waits in the thick brush for the arrival of an unseen hunter. I reported this feeling to Miller.

"Randy, do you think infantry is moving toward you as a result of our last fire mission?"

"All I know is this! We know the enemy is out there and they know we are here. Sooner or later we are going to lock horns, and I'm out here all by myself and caught in the middle."

"Suppose we drop some rounds into the forest between you and the target area and see if we can flush-out any of their infantry."

"That makes sense and makes me feel a little better."

"Randy, the Major has been listening. He thinks we should drop a few rounds of HE, with fuse quick, into the trees several hundred yards east of you and see what happens."

There was a painful delay as the fire direction specialists computed new data for the howitzers and relayed this information to the firing battery. Finally Dell reported, "First Round On The Way" and added a message for me, "Be sure and DUCK."

The first round of this second mission landed four or five hundred yards east of me with a spectacular tree burst, high above the ground. After the tree burst I could plainly hear under-brush moving, ice and snow crunching, and excited voices conversing loudly in German. It was instantly obvious to me, the enemy infantry was moving quickly in my direction. I sensed the round, "200 Over."

Dell took my sensing, but did not relay it to fire direction. He asked, "Did we stir up anybody?"

"You sure did, it is like a hornets nest out there. Get some more rounds on those bastards in a hurry if you want me home for breakfast." Over the telephone I could hear Dell order the fire direction technicians to reduce the range by 200 yards, and almost immediately reported back to me, "On The Way."

The second round burst in the tree tops much closer to my position, producing the sounds of shattered limbs falling and much louder and closer excited German voices. In desperation I sensed the round "200 Over - Fire For Effect!"

"Randy, according to the firing chart, if we drop the range another 200 yards, we will be bursting High Explosive shells in the trees right over your head."

"Damn it Dell, do it! Do it NOW! If you don't do it now you can kiss my southern ass good bye!"

"OK ole buddy. Duck and good luck!"

Deep in the fox hole I tried to cover my entire body with my steel helmet. I wanted anything I could get to protect me from the red hot steel fragments I knew would come. 'Friendly Fire,' as they call it, started bursting in the tree tops all around me. Tree tops were blown off, jagged tree pieces fell to the ground, and mind boggling explosions were everywhere. Vicious, hot steel shell fragments, flying through the cold air, seeking their final resting place, found the bodies of enemy soldiers, and caused the screams of wounded and dying men to mingle with the sounds of more exploding howitzer shells. As quickly as it started, this man-made hell-on-earth stopped. I was immediately

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conscious of three things: First, the moans of the wounded Germans around me; Second, the acrid smell of burned powder; and Three, there was even more movement of people in the forest, very near to my fox hole. I had survived the shelling unhurt, but I needed more covering fire. Knowing Dell and the Major wanted my report and the fact that I needed more fire, I reached up for the EE8A on the parapet of my fox hole, two feet above my head. It was gone! It had been shot away, not even the phone lines remained. The realization that I was totally alone, and with no support, drained the remaining strength from my body. I collapsed to the bottom of the fox hole, my heart pounding like a drum and almost afraid to breath. By accident, my right hand dropped to the top of my combat boot and felt the handle of the razor sharp, double edged, boot-knife sheathed there. An automatic reflex, born of my Ranger training at Camp Atterbury, caused me to withdraw the fighting blade from it's leather sheath. The Pawn Broker in Boston who sold me this knife while I was at the Port of Embarkation had assured me this knife was the finest 'fighting blade' money could buy and added, the purchase of this knife might someday save my life. Of course at the time I considered this a sales pitch, but I bought the blade anyway. For some reason I had worn the knife in my right hand boot ever since we had reached Europe.

I waited silently in the fox hole, knees slightly bent, with both legs positioned squarely beneath my torso. The leather wrapped handle of the fighting knife was firmly grasped in both hands, it's sharp steel tip pointed upward, toward the top of the fox hole. After several minutes of waiting in this position, almost paralyzed with fear, I could sense someone moving in my direction, thrashing wildly through the deep snow and

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fallen limbs. Suddenly a metal object dropped into the fox hole, striking my helmet, and finally coming to rest upon my shoulder. Was it a grenade? No, it was a German helmet! Before I could react, a bare headed body followed the helmet into the fox hole and landed head down on top of me with a guttural grunt. Strong body odor filled the air. I could smell his filthy uniform, his stinking wet leather boots, and worst of all, I could smell the foul breath which gushed from his mouth as a result of the unexpected fall.

My terrible fears suddenly turned into great strength and unleashed fury. The cold steel fighting blade was thrust upward with the power of both arms and legs. This thrust met the dead weight of the falling German body. The five inch blade entered the mans chest just below has Adams-apple, severing his sternum from top to bottom and in the process exposing steaming internal organs, and starting a fatal flow of his life's blood. Surprised, and in terrible pain, the German screamed, "Gott In Himmel!" The power of my upward thrust moved him completely out of the fox hole. With the German infantryman now lying on the parapet of the fox hole, I used the force of both arms to descend the fighting blade into the German's open chest and ripped toward his belly button. Only his metal belt buckle prevented the fighting blade from reaching it's intended destination.

Now standing fully erect in the fox hole, I withdrew the fighting blade from the man's body. His warm blood ran down both arms, staining the front of my overcoat in the process. Slimy entrails hung from his clothing with a smell of fresh feces. Mortally wounded, but not yet dead, he cursed his fate and frantically grabbed at my arms. I finally shook free from his grasp, and in desperation, slit his throat. His throat gurgled as

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if he had some last words to say, and then his body went limp. With a final shudder and gurgle, the enemy lay still, and groaned no more. Bloody, emotionally drained, and physically exhausted, I slumped to the bottom of the fox hole. Gradually my mind began to clear and the reality of my predicament set in. Suddenly I realized enemy troops were moving all around me. If I were to survive, I knew I had to escape discovery in some manner, but how? Gently I pulled the dead German into the fox hole and decided to stay hidden beneath the bloody carcass until I heard no more movement in the forest.

Time passed slowly with nothing to do but wait and think. Supporting the weight of the dead German soldier was physical torture and the smell of his ruptured intestines made me ill. Finally I could endure this experience no more! With no thought of personal danger, I heaved the bloody carcass out of my hole, stood up in the darkness, took a deep breath, and expected to die. I just didn't give a damn anymore! Fortunately, except for me, the forest was empty. With no communications with Battalion, I knew I was of no use to them here in the forest. I also knew I had no chance of survival if I remained with the slain German, so I thought, "If I stay I die. If I leave the forest I will die. What the Hell, what difference doe is make what I do?" With this thought in mind, I decided to leave the forest.

(Two)
Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium - The Journey
22 December 1944 - 0400 Hours

Cautiously, and silently as possible, I slowly inched the short distance from the fox hole to the Vielsalm road. The only thing I knew for certain was, the Americans were to my left, but I had absolutely no idea where the enemy was located. Assuming the

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Germans were on my right, I turned left and started walking slowly toward Baraque de Fraiture and the 589th FA Bn Command Post. While training in England, combat veterans had told us that combat experience sharpens the senses. They claimed experience gained in combat enhances the basic instincts animals use for survival. I now believed this to be true. Instinct and training had kept me alive so far. Maybe these instincts, plus army training, would help me return safely through the American lines.

Progress in the ice and snow was slow at first. I caught myself moving from shadow to shadow, then remaining motionless in the shadows to look, listen, and feel. As I came closer to the cross roads, my concern over the Germans, whom I concluded were behind me, became less and less. My main concern now centered more upon the American troops in front of me. I knew they were on edge, easily spooked, and had heavy trigger fingers. This concern was very real. The pass-word and counter-sign are changed each night at mid-night. I had not been advised of the new words before I left the Command Post to man the observation post. Where did this leave me if I was challenged by an American sentry? I had no answer to my own question, but I wanted to get this ordeal over with as quickly as possible. Throwing caution to the wind, I picked up the pace and started walking down the icy road in the best military manner I could muster. Then what I feared happened!

A suspicious sounding voice in the distance rang out, "HALT - Who Goes There?"

Without thinking, or slowing my stride, I yelled back, "My name is Tommy Tit, and I don't give a shit!"

This response must have taken the unseen sentry by surprise because I heard a smothered chuckle, followed by, "Sergeant Pierson, what in the hell are you doing out here on the Vielsalm road with all this shooting going on?"

"Don't give me a hard time, I've had a bad night and I'm headed to the Command Post."

"Sarge. do you need anything from us?"

Wearily I replied, "Yes. Tell the other sentries I'll be passing through in a few minutes and I don't know the damned pass-word." As an after thought I added, "Also tell them to keep their fucking trigger fingers away from their triggers."

"Sarge, you got it! No problem. You take care now."

(Three)
Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium - Command Post, 589th FA Bn
22 December 1944 - 0430 Hours

Standing in the doorway of the CP I thought, "I'll be damned, I made it!" While I watched the frenzied action in the fire direction center, I realized I was a wretched looking sight, my sunken eyes staring from a blood covered face, and my woolen OD colored overcoat caked with dried mud and blood. Too tired to speak, I just stood and stared. I stayed there, motionless, for several minutes before someone finally noticed me. Major Parker exclaimed, "My God, Sergeant Pierson, we thought you had bought the farm. When the phone line went dead, we thought we had killed you." This apologetic remark mirrored the thoughts of everyone in the room. The Major broke the embarrassing silence when he asked, "Are you wounded? Should I call a medic?"

My monotone reply was, "I think I'm OK, but I could use a drink. Does anybody

have a cigarette? I've had a rough time. I'm just cold and worn out."

Miller and Tacker both rushed to the door and took me into the fire direction center. As Tacker helped me remove my filthy webbing and overcoat, Miller lit a cigarette and stuck it in my mouth. As I took a couple of deep drags on the cigarette, Miller dug into the fire direction chest and removed a full bottle of French Cognac. Major Parker averted his eyes as Miller opened the bottle and motioned for me to take a drink.

In the meantime Tacker had dampened a cloth and was wiping away the dried blood and caked mud from my neck, face, and hands. As the mud and blood began to disappear, Tacker exclaimed, "Where did this blood come from? This is not your blood. You're not even wounded!"

Tacker's proclamation surprised most of the people in the room but it also relieved some of their pent up tension. The Major told Tacker to put me on his cot when he realized I was not seriously hurt, and added, "For now, Sergeant Pierson needs rest, let's leave him alone for a while, but the rest of us have plenty of work to do."

On the Major's cot, I finished my second cigarette and my third long drag from Miller's bottle of Cognac. Finally the warmth of the CP, combined with the effects of the undiluted Cognac started to relax me. For now, I was safe and with friends, I was warm and comfortable, and I was dog-tired and sleepy. Moments after I laid my head on the cot, I was fast asleep.

(Four)
Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium - 589th FA Bn Cross Roads Perimeter Defense Lines
22 December 1944 - 0530 Hours

As expected, another determined enemy attack was mounted against the cross roads defense by ever increasing numbers of German infantry, now supported by heavy mortar fire. For some reason, the mortar fire was still directed at the artillery men in the perimeter defense lines who were deployed in fox holes located in the open fields surrounding the cross roads.

The ensuing fire fight was intense. Captain Huxel utilized the mobility and awesome fire power of his four anti-aircraft half tracks in conjunction with the fire power of the 57mm high velocity tank gun on the light Recon tank and his dug-in, stationary, automatic weapons. This attack lasted more than one hour before the badly mauled German infantry withdrew into the bowels of the protective Ardennes Forest. By 0730 Captain Huxel had men searching the edge of the forest looking for killed or wounded Germans, and those of the enemy wishing to surrender. By 0830 the Captain reported his after battle find to the Command Post: "22 enemy dead, 4 enemy wounded, 6 un-wounded enemy captured, and 4 slightly wounded American GIs." Major Parker thanked him for his report and advised Captain Huxel to prepare the defenses for an even more determined attack which would be launched shortly by the German troop commander.

The 106th Division Artillery headquarters called at 1155 hours to inform Major Parker that he should try to withdraw the remnants of the 589th FA Bn to Manhay, Belgium to get re-supplied by the 3rd Armored Division, who still occupied that town. The Major agreed that we desperately needed food, fuel, and ammunition, but he could not, in good faith, withdraw the 589th support from the troops of other units defending the cross roads who would be forced to remain. The Major stated that even though the

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town of Manhay might be secure, he doubted the road from Baraque de Fraiture to Manhay was still under American control. In the end, the decision to withdraw, or to stay, was left to the Major. Major Parker decided to stay.

By mid-day, most of the preparations to reinforce and prepare the perimeter defense had been completed. Feet were washed and dried, socks and underwear changed, hot "C" Rations consumed, ammunition redistributed, fortifications improved, and fire power planned for the anticipated afternoon attack. Earlier, the Major had arranged for temporary reinforcements from the 3rd Armored Division. The 3rd Armored, now hard pressed itself, dispatched a platoon to Baraque de Fraiture consisting of three medium tanks and one command type half-track. Upon arrival at 1425. the platoon leader reported he had received small arms fire on the road between Manhay and Baraque de Fraiture. He also reported advance elements of the 560th Volksgrenadier Division were probing the southern flank of the Manhay defenses and he did not know how long he would be able to remain.

The third attack on the cross roads started at 1530 hours, with a vicious artillery and mortar barrage preceding the infantry attack. This advance barrage targeted all buildings, howitzer positions, and tracked vehicles, in addition to softening-up the men in the perimeter fox holes. The barrage lasted almost a life time, about twenty minutes. It was quickly followed by withering small arms fire, laid down by automatic weapons and designed to keep the American heads down during the relentless German infantry attack.

During the initial barrage, our positions received many direct hits, and near misses, resulting in our first serious casualties, one of which was Major Parker. He

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received a large, ugly body wound, in the left stomach and chest area. He was immediately treated by a medic who reported both bright and dark red blood coming from the chest cavity, indicating both ruptured veins and arteries. The prognosis for the Major was not good. The medic applied Sulfa Drugs directly into the chest cavity to fight infection, administered morphine shots to lessen the pain, and firmly packed sterile gauze into the open wound. He then applied a tight compress bandage to the entire wounded chest area to hopefully slow the flow of blood. Three of us then lifted the Major, carried him into the Command Post, and placed him on his cot in a sitting position.

This battle was vicious, both sides were determined to prevail, and it lasted until the Germans suddenly decided to withdraw into the shelter of the deep forest at 1800 hours. During this two and one half hours the battle raged, both sides suffered severe casualties to men and material. The cross roads defenders sustained numerous men killed and wounded, the light Recon tank destroyed, one of our 105mm howitzers damaged, two anti-aircraft half-tracks destroyed, and all of the Tank Destroyer guns captured. The American fire destroyed six German panzers and four armored assault guns. While withdrawing, the Germans left without removing their dead or wounded, which littered the open ground east of the perimeter defense line, on both the Houffalize and Vielsalm roads.

To accomplish this carnage, the American defenders expended more than 200 rounds of artillery shells, an estimated 3000 rounds of 50-caliber ammunition, more than 25 Bazooka shells, and untold 30-caliber ammunition. The outcome of this battle was in

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doubt many times as the fortunes of war ebbed and flowed. By 1800 hours, the American salient had barely won this fight, using superior leadership, grit, determination, and with excellent planning.

At 1845 the 3rd Armored Division contacted it's platoon leader by radio and ordered him to return to Manhay. The Armored Lieutenant offered to evacuate some of the more seriously wounded men in his half-track. Over Major Parker's strong objections, Major Goldstein insisted the Major accompany the Lieutenant back to Manhay. Upon consultation with the senior medic present, Major Goldstein decided to place Major Parker, three other seriously wounded GIs, and a medic in the half-track. Major Goldstein filled a 2 1/2 ton GMC truck with lesser wounded men and the German prisoners. He and his truck then joined the convoy of armored vehicles. The five vehicle convoy, headed by a lead tank, left for Manhay at 1915 hours maintaining strict black-out discipline, leaving Captain Huxel in command of the cross roads defenders.

Under the cover of darkness, Captain Huxel led an armed reconnaissance patrol into the forest east of the cross roads. Three hundred yards into the forest the patrol encountered German infantry digging in. The patrol broke off contact immediately and returned to American held territory. No shots were fired. The Captain returned to the Command Post to record and report what he had learned. Captain Huxel then began preparations to withstand another enemy attack at dawn.

(Five)

Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium - On Guard Duty at the Command Post
22 December 1944 - 2000 Hours

My sentry partner for the night was John Schaffner from "A" Battery. John was

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normally an irreverent soul, always laughing and cracking jokes, but tonight, John was serious and all business. Our two man hole did not satisfy him. After the day's action, John wanted the hole larger and deeper. As he bluntly put it, he didn't want to be fighting with me for the bottom of the hole when things heated up. He was convinced we

would be attacked and overrun this night. Word must have gotten around that I had killed a Kraut with a knife, because while we were in our hole eating dry cereal, John pulled out his sheath knife and stuck it in a fence railing we were using as a parapet in front of the hole. I felt more comfortable with mine sheathed in my boot, but prayed to the Almighty I would never have to use my fighting knife again. Finally the hole seemed to satisfy Schaffner because he sat in the bottom of the hole, wrapped himself in a blanket, and advised me it was my shift and he was going to sleep. This was news to me because we had not discussed who would stay awake for which shifts. Even though I had one more stripe than Schaffner and could have assigned him the first shift, I decided what-the-hell, I had taken a nap in the CP and besides, I wasn't sleepy anyway.

About 2000 hours we received several incoming mortar rounds, big stuff. These rounds were directed at a half-track a few hundred yards across a field from us. I was glad the Krauts were not shooting in our direction because the explosions were very powerful. However, the only effect these explosions had on Schaffner was to make him pull the blanket over his head more firmly, as though the blanket would protect him from flying shell fragments. As I watched, several more rounds exploded in the snow around the half-track and then the vehicle sustained a direct hit. The results of this hit were horrible to witness. The first thing we heard after the explosion was the wounded men in

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the half-track screaming for help. Next we heard the half-track ammunition starting to explode. By this time Schaffner was awake and standing beside me in the fox hole, but neither of us knew what to do. We were on guard duty and had a responsibility to the men working inside the Command Post, yet we felt one of us should leave our post and give aid to the wounded men regardless of the personal danger involved.

My quandary was short lived - the front door to the CP building burst open and Staff Sergeant Frank Tacker ran past us in the dark, shouting for someone to help him assist the wounded Ack - Ack men. My doubts now gone, I told Schaffner to stay put and I followed Tacker into the night running toward the burning half-track and it's exploding ammunition. Tacker reached the burning vehicle moments before I arrived. With one powerful vault, he cleared the side of the armored vehicle and landed feet first in the fighting compartment. In one fluid move he lifted one wounded GI over the side of the half-track and dropped him into my outstretched arms. I barely had time to lower the body to the ground when the second body came over the side of the half-track, quickly followed by Frank Tacker himself. At this point my heart was beating rapidly and my breathing was labored. We were horribly exposed to enemy fire standing in the white snow and highlighted by the brilliant light produced by the burning vehicle. Of course I could not speak for Frank, outwardly he was calm, but I was so nervous I was actually trembling. In plain view of the enemy, we stooped to check the conditions of the two wounded men. It did not take a medical doctor to determine that one man was dead, and the other badly wounded.

Tacker needed help to get the wounded man up and onto his shoulder. Once the

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man was in a typical fireman's carry position, Tacker started the long, slippery, and dangerous trek back to the Command Post and a waiting medic. I tried to drag the body of the dead GI away from the fury of the burning vehicle and the still exploding 50-caliber ammunition, but the badly burned flesh of the man's wrist and forearm came off onto my woolen gloves. I stopped trying to drag the body, moved away from the burning vehicle, leaned over in the darkness, and retched on the snow. The terrible sight and horrible smell caused by the burned human flesh was too much for my stomach.

How my friend Frank Tacker managed to carry the dead weight of the wounded man the distance to the Command Post through the ice and deep snow, in total darkness, is a mystery me. I do know Frank was a young man with considerable physical strength, a deep sense of responsibility, immense personal courage, and a man of high moral character.

I sincerely wish this experience had a more happy ending for the two Anti-aircraft men, but it did not. The second American GI died on the shoulder of Frank Tacker while being carried to the Command Post.

By the time I returned to the Command Post, Frank had already gone inside the building and I crawled back into the fox hole with Schaffner. John was excited and wanted to talk. "Randy what in the hell did you two guys do out there?" Why did you risk your ass for two guys you don't even know?"

"John, we just tried to help a couple of guys who were in big trouble. They would have done the same for us."

"Yea, but you could have gotten hurt out there."

"I didn't even think about it John. I just ran out there after Tacker when he yelled for help. It was just one of those knee-jerk reactions."

"You have to be nuts to do something like that. You could have gotten yourself killed."

"OK Schaffner, knock it off! I don't feel philosophical right now. I was so scared, I think I pissed in my pants. My pants are wet and cold, my nerves are shot, and my hands are shaking so hard I can't work my Zipo lighter."

"Yea Randy, I noticed. You want me to give you a light?"

With an affirmative nod, I sat down in the fox hole. With shaking hands I cupped the cigarette to kill the light as Schaffner applied the flame of the lighter to the end of my cigarette. When the cigarette was lit, John clicked the Zipo shut and commented, "Maybe tomorrow will be better Randy, Major Goldstein should be back with reinforcements."

After a few long drags on the Lucky Strike, I started to relax and finally told Schaffner to stay awake because it was now my turn to sleep.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

As a result of these two incidents, Major Goldstein later recommended me for a direct promotion from Sergeant to 2nd Lieutenant. In addition he recommended that I be awarded a Silver Star for Valor.

THE OD YEARS: WWII AMERICANA

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE ARDENNES OFFENSIVE - DAY 8

(One)
Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium - 589th FA Bn, Sergeant Alford's Bunker
23 December 1944, 0330 Hours

Sitting in the dim light of the shell fragment damaged bunker, Sergeant Barney Alford exclaimed to Corporal Fairchild, "I don't like this shit Charlie. You know we are

surrounded and don't have a chance, sitting here like two damned clipped-wing ducks. Look at the beating we took yesterday, Jerry is going to bury us! Then he will roll over the top of us, and there is not a damned thing we can do about it."

"I sure hope you are wrong, Barney. We've been sitting here for four days now. Maybe the higher-ups will get off of their gold braided butts and send us some help."

"Fat chance buddy! Nobody is thinking about saving us, they're too busy covering their own asses.. Forget it Charley, we won't get any help, we have been declared expendable, we're just part of the fortunes of war. No one gives a shit what happens to us but out mothers? Christ, we have shot up most of our ammunition and we are short on rations. What are we supposed to do, throw empty shell casings at the frigging German tanks when they come back later today?"

"Barney, let me ask you a question, now that Major Goldstein has gone to Manhay to try to get us some help, is Captain Huxel in charge?"

"Who else? He is the senior of the two Captains left!"

"If something happens to our last two officers, what happens then?"

"I guess we draw straws."

"Captain Huxel is a strange man. I don't know him very well, but he must be very brave. It seems like he exposed himself to enemy fire and awful lot. If he keeps doing that, we may be down to one officer pretty damned quick."

"Charlie, I don't know whether he is brave or stupid, but I do know this about Captain Huxel, he believes that Jerry has not made the bullet with his name on it yet."

"Do you believe that stuff about a bullet with your name on it? You know Barney, if it has your name on it, no matter where you hide it will find and kill you?"

"The way I look at it Charlie, they all have my name on them, but I'm going to keep ducking anyway."

"Do you really think we are going to die today Barney?"

"We all die when the time and place is right. Looks like this time and place may be right. Christ, I hope not! There are too many things I want to do and so many places I'd like to see. Oh Hell Charley, I don't know."

"Barney, did you ever read about the Alamo?"

"Yea, I think I did. Isn't the Alamo an old army fort somewhere in Texas?"

"That's right. A long time ago, a Mexican General, named Santa Anna or something, I don't remember his name, tried to capture the Alamo. A bunch of Americans, they were called patriots, decided they were going to stop this Mexican General. They were guys like Jim Bowie and Davey Crocket who decided to stop the Mexicans at the Alamo. All the American patriots at the Alamo were killed in the battle, but they kept the Mexican army from capturing the Alamo. There were no American

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survivors!"

"Yea Charlie, I remember them, those guys made history. At the last minute Colonel Bill Travis and his Texans came rushing in and drove off the Mexicans while the Texans yelled and screamed, Remember the Alamo!"

"Barney, to me this battle at Baraque de Fraiture is something like the battle for the Alamo. I hope some historian in the future will remember this battle and call it The Battle for Parker's Crossroads, that would be a nice honor for Major Parker. We have an Alamo type defense going on here, the main difference is we are stopping Germans, in tanks, not Mexicans on foot."

"Lets not get too carried away Charlie. Dying is easy, staying alive gets hard sometimes. I've talked to guys who have been in combat before and they have a theory about being a good soldier and surviving. They say you can't change from a civilian to a soldier, I mean a good soldier, unless you accept the fact that if you stay in combat long enough you will be killed. Once you accept the inevitable, that you are going to die, you lose the fear of death and get on with the job of being a soldier. In the last few days, I guess I've made the evolution from civilian to soldier. I know I will die if I stay in combat long enough, so I quit worrying about dying and concentrate on getting my job done and surviving in the process. Why don't we stop talking about dying and start acting like good soldiers? We are in a combat unit and we are in combat. What more can I say. I promise you one thing though, when I go to the big PX (Post Exchange) in the sky, it will be one expensive trip for the Krauts. I'm going to take a bunch of those bastards with me, I'm not going to get captured and end up a POW (Prisoner of War)."

"Jesus Barney, cut the crap. I don't like to hear you talking like that. I don't want to hear any more."

"OK Charlie, I guess enough preaching is enough. Has that snow you are cooking melted yet? I need a cup of coffee - Bad!"

"I'm with you buddy, coffee will make us both feel better. I need a caffeine jolt to get started. It will be a busy day. If we are going to have some heavy action this morning, I need to check the howitzers." With an after thought Corporal Fairchild added, "It shouldn't take long, we have only two howitzers left."

Silence claimed the bunker. No conversation, just two grimy GI's deep in thought as they cradled their hot canteen cups of black coffee in their gloved hands, and tried to envision what was in store for them come the breaking dawn. Corporal Fairchild finally broke the silence, "I've got to check the weapons." As he left the shelter of the bunker and entered the frigid air of the pre-dawn darkness, he checked his GI wrist watch. It was 0410 hours.

(Two)

Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium - 589th FA Bn Command Post
23 December 1944, 0330 Hours

The fighting yesterday had taken its toll in men and equipment. Enemy fire had shot away all telephone lines and radio antennas. Enemy fire had severely damaged gun emplacements and protective personnel bunkers in addition to damaging the Command Post building. Throughout the night, Cannoneers, truck drivers, and fire direction personnel were pressed into service to restore the local communications network. The task was made difficult because of darkness, the treacherous frozen snow, and because of

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the sporadic interdiction fire being thrown at us by German mortars and artillery. By 0500 hours, local communications were considered adequate and most personnel had returned to their defensive locations and responsibilities. However, one fact remained, we could not communicate with anyone beyond our perimeter defense, and no one outside our perimeter defense could communicate with us. We were totally isolated. There was nothing we could do but await the fury of the eminent enemy attack at dawn.

The first shots of the pre-dawn enemy artillery preparation began at 0530 hours and were fired from 'German 88s.' The German 88mm all purpose field piece was one of the most versatile, mobile, and accurate artillery weapons used by any nation engaged in combat during WWII. It was not a howitzer, which is a moderately low velocity weapon

with a short barrel. The 'German 88' was a long barreled gun which fired high velocity projectiles a great distance. The velocity of the '88' projectiles in flight gave the incoming round a distinctive sound. No soldier who was in the vicinity of an incoming '88' round can forget this unique sound.

In the CP we heard this sound, mixed with the crack of the exploding shell. The force of this explosion shook the sturdy stone Belgian farmhouse we were using as a Command Post. The first assault of the day on the cross roads had begun. The cross roads defenders hugged the ice covered bottoms of their protective holes, ready to pop out and challenge the infantry attack which always follows such an artillery preparation.

Captain Huxel had formed the cross roads defense perimeter in the shape of a new moon. The heavy portion of the defense faced east. At each end the defense line curved toward the west and covered our north and south flanks. This shape was designed

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to protect the main line of defense from an attack by enemy infantry who might infiltrate through the forest and attempt a flanking attack from the north or south. For four days this defensive formation had served us well. It effectively controlled the two main east/west roads the German armor must use to accommodate their heavy vehicles. The very light small arms fire from the northern and southern flanks had caused us no particular problems in the past. I sincerely hoped our good luck would hold today.

The pre-dawn artillery preparation was much lighter than expected. The initial pressure exerted by the combined armor and infantry attack came mainly from the two main roads and lacked the force we expected. As the fire fight progressed past daylight, a shift in enemy pressure was detected. More small arms and automatic weapon fire was originating from the forest directly north and south of the cross roads. It became evident Jerry planned to keep pressure on the defenders with armor and infantry from the east, while unsupported infantry was engaged in an encircling action on foot through the dense forest. This fire fight lasted until 0945 hours, more than four hours, with both sides suffering severe casualties.

By mid morning Captain Huxel faced the problem of trying to establish a complete circumference defense with ever dwindling numbers of people and weapons to accomplish the job. However, he had no alternative, other than surrender, and determined he must 'circle the wagon.' He knew the enemy would soon be attacking from all points on the compass. The current 'half moon' defense could no longer do the job. To 'circle the wagon,' Captain Huxel had to re-form his 'half moon' defense lines while establishing a tight defensive circle around the cross roads. With men and material

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bunched into this much smaller enclave, the targets for German mortar, artillery, and direct fire from tanks became more concentrated. This was not good, but the only other viable option was to try and disengage from the enemy and withdraw westward toward Manhay through ever increasing enemy held territory. The Captain's decision was the same as Major Parker's previous decisions, we would stand, and delay the enemy.

Reorganization of the defenses became frantic. New protective holes were dug, automatic weapons relocated, ammunition redistributed, and the smaller communications network revamped. All this was accomplished between 1000 and 1350 hours. This was a gigantic task to be accomplished by less than sixty cold, hungry, glassy-eyed and bone-weary men. No one could remember how it was done, but the fact is, it was done. By 1400 hours the defensive circle around Baraque de Fraiture was complete. We knew the German observers had watched the entire process and knew where every man and weapon was now located.

The second enemy preparation of the day started at 1430 hours and was concentrated in the now much smaller defensive area. This was the most concentrated and devastating artillery fire we had yet faced. It was totally terrifying and gut wrenching. Men broke and ran, even though there was no place to run, only to be cut down by shell fragments and small arms fire. Those who remained in their protective holes were shaken, deafened, and disoriented. Strange things happen to men's minds under this barbaric type of stress. Some men cringe and cry for their mothers through swollen faces and tear stained cheeks. Others squat, staring with non-seeing eyes, while rocking back and forth, and moaning through half opened mouths. Some become angry

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and extremely hostile, torn between the strong opposing instincts of fight or flight, and lash out at friends or foe, with little or no provocation.

While observing the action around our defensive perimeter, I stood precariously by a second story window of the CP building, my body partially shielded by the huge boulders which composed the outer wall of the building. Suddenly I heard the unmistakable sound of an incoming German 88mm artillery round. With no other place to go, I instinctively dropped onto the floor behind a large boulder. The '88' round, probably armor piercing, entered the first floor of the CP an exploded with an ear shattering burst that caused enormous amounts of chocking dust and acrid smoke inside the building. This violent explosion also caused the collapse of the portion of the second floor where I lay. The sudden collapse of this floor pitched me into the air and I landed violently in a heap on the first floor, the body of my friend Jim Lemley cushioning my fall. Miraculously Lemley was not seriously hurt by the explosion, the falling ceiling timbers, nor by me, but for some reason he became furious with me. He jumped up, shook himself off, and attacked me as though I had fallen on top of him on purpose. Quickly, I grappled with him, wrestled him to the floor, and tried to calm him down before either of us became a victim of our own confrontation..

Lying there on the debris covered floor, with mortal combat surrounding us, still grappling with each other, I felt Lemley's body go limp. Not knowing exactly what to do, I relaxed my death grip on his arms and turned his face toward mine. This large, strong, heroic young man had momentarily cracked. His body was shaking and tears were flowing from each eye, creating an uneven clean line down each dust covered cheek.

Cradling him in my arms, I kept reassuring him softly, almost tenderly, "It's alright buddy, it's alright." Between deep, body wracking sobs, this great hulk of a man moaned, "Sarge I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry . . ."

By 1530 German infantry probes were occurring from all positions of the compass. The enemy probe from the east was by far the strongest. The newly arrived advance elements of the elite German 2nd SS Panzer Division started playing a prominent role in the attack, bravely exposing their panzers to our fire and then subjecting our defenders to exceptionally destructive fire from their high velocity tank weapons. Judging from the fire of the enemy gunners had decided to eliminate their main threat, our two remaining 105mm howitzers.

At about 1600 hours, Captain Huxel entered the Command Post cellar and made an announcement. Even though the situation was desperate, his voice was calm and he spoke deliberately. "The situation is hopeless. We can no longer resist these overwhelming odds. We have more than accomplishes our mission. We have only two choices and must make a decision now. We can remain in place and be killed or

captured, or we can try to escape. I will not make this decision for you. There is no correct choice, each man must make his own decision. Any questions?"

"Yes Sir, what are you going to do Captain?"

"I will try to escape. I plan to move northwest through the forest toward Manhay and try to reach the defensive line established by the 82nd Airborne Division in that area. Before I leave, let me offer to take anyone with me who wishes to escape. The German heavy preparation is complete. There is minimal small arms fire coming from the enemy

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positions. I'm certain the German commander feels he has an easy 'mop-up' operation ahead of him. I strongly suggest to each man who wishes to leave - do it promptly, and go in small groups. Regardless of your decision, I am honored to have served with you. Good Luck!"

His message complete, Captain Huxel gathered his gear and departed the cellar. No one followed him!

Much muttering and soul searching followed the Captain's farewell speech and lonely exit. Frank Tacker, Dell Miller and I quickly exchanged thoughts. I favored the Captain's approach. I wanted to escape from this Hell-Hole. I had made up my mind, I would rather be killed trying to escape than become a German POW. The thought of dying as a prisoner in a German POW camp did not appeal to me.

Dell's opinion was not as firm as mine. He could see advantages and disadvantages in each of the scenarios, but need time to think and to make up his mind.

Tacker was at the opposite end of the spectrum from me. As the senior non-commissioned officer present, he felt it was his obligation to stay with his troops as long as anyone else stayed. He viewed it as the responsibility of command. When Dell reminded Tacker that Captain Huxel had made the decision to allow each individual to decide his own destiny, Tacker argued he did not share the Captain's feelings and could not follow his example.

To me, precious time was being wasted in useless academic debate about command responsibility. Dell noticed I was getting fidgety as I gathered my personal belongings and asked if I had changed my mind.

With a negative nod of the head, and not looking at Tacker, I started up the cellar stairs. Above the murmur in the cellar I could hear Miller say, "Randy, wait for me, I'm coming with you."

We paused at the entrance of the building and closely observed the terrain. There was nothing that could prepare us for the ordeal we were about to experience. To survive, we needed mental discipline, physical strength, common sense, and above all, an enormous amount of good luck. A highly religious person might call survival under these circumstances, God's Will, God's Providence, or even Predestination.. All I knew was, we needed all the help we could get while crossing the five hundred yards across 'Dante's White Frozen Hell' and into the deep forest without getting killed..

First, we must cross the ice and snow covered road in front of the Command Post. This road was plainly visible to the surrounding enemy troops. Then cross a drainage ditch about two feet deep and six feet wide, which in fair weather would require one good leap. However in this weather crossing the ditch became a formidable obstacle. The next challenge about three feet beyond the ice covered ditch was a four foot high wire fence. Climbing this obstacle while encumbered by bulky winter clothing and equipment dangling loosely from our web belts would have been difficult under

normal conditions, but these conditions were not normal, people would be shooting at us. The next portion of this obstacle course consisted of sprinting across frozen plowed ground about the length of two football fields. This ground was covered with slippery ice-covered foot high rows which ran perpendicular to our line of flight. Each row was barely distinguishable to the eye because the heavy snow cover made the ground appear

flat. At the end of this field a second four foot wire fence reared it's ugly head and waited to be climbed.

Beyond the second wire fence was another plowed snow covered field. Some three hundred yards beyond this field a huge drainage ditch separated the open field from the dense Ardennes Forest. I thought if I could get to the deep drainage ditch and into the thick forest I might escape from the man-made Hell at the cross roads.

With the big picture in mind, I slowly moved across the icy road in a crouched position. Once I was safely across the road, across the ditch and over the first fence, Dell followed, maintaining an interval between us. Apparently we attracted no enemy attention until Dell started climbing the first fence. About half way across the first field, I heard small arms fire and looked back. I saw Dell struggling with his overcoat which was caught on a fence post, and observed tell-tale bits of ice flying near him as the enemy bullets hit the hard ice and ricocheted.

As much as I wanted to help my friend, there was nothing I could do. In a crouch, I turned and started to run with all my might toward the second fence, more than one hundred yards away. Even though the field was slippery and uneven, I was able to time my stride perfectly and cleared the second fence cleanly with a head first dive. I landed heavily on the frozen ground beyond the fence, face down, with the wind partially knocked out of me.

Luckily for me, I lay still, partially hidden by the snow, long enough to see small arms fire kicking up ice chips in front of me, where I would have been, had I not fallen on my ace in the snow. The German gunners had anticipated the path of my flight,

much like a hunter would 'lead' a bird in flight. It was clearly apparent the next three hundred yards would become a game of wits between the hunters and the hunted. Artillery fire did not concern me. No army operating short of supplies, as the German army was, would waste an artillery round on just one man. Rifle and machine gun fire were my prime concerns.

As I lay there, hidden and resting, the sounds of small arms fire increased. Although I could not see the action while lying down, I suspected Miller, and others, leaving the Command Post building were drawing fire. Consuming fear increased my impulse to get up and run. Fortunately for me, common sense told me to lay low, crawl, and seek cover between the rows in the plowed field where possible. The next portion of this perilous journey was very slow because the shelter provided by the rows in the field did not run directly toward the protection offered by the deep drainage ditch.

Ultimately, my slow progress was interrupted by the sound of an incoming mortar round. My instinct to freeze overcame my impulse to run. As expected, the shell hit the ground and exploded nearby. Suddenly the air around me was filled with white smoke and particles of white phosphorus. I could then smell the strong odor of burning cloth and realized this searing hot metal would soon reach my tender flesh. Quickly I sat up, disregarding cover completely, and started scooping handfuls of snow and forcing it into the burned holes in my outer garments. Then I remembered from my training that this would not stop the burning, white phosphorus will burn under water. Frantically I

retrieved my boot knife and started flicking particles of hot white phosphorus from my clothing. The phosphorus burned more rapidly than I could flick. Quickly my attention

moved from clothing to the burning areas of my legs. Probing my legs with the fighting blade hurt as much as the burn itself, however I knew it had to be done.

The smell of burning flesh was now mingled with the smell of burning wool. I probed deeper and worked faster with the sharp knife blade. As quickly as it started, the burning stopped. Only the pain remained. I was still alive and desperate. Throwing caution to the wind, I stood up and ran, my body fully extended, my pained legs pumping, my heart pounding, and my lungs screaming for oxygen.

Cherry red tracers joined the rifle fire. I was now the target of a Jerry machine gunner. Still I stayed erect and ran. The drainage ditch came closer. Should I drop to the ground or keep running? I was drawing intense small arms fire. I continued to run. The ditch was near. My heart was about to explode! From exertion, fear, or both? With one final burst of strength, I lunged into the air and over the edge of the drainage ditch.

The result of my desperate leap turned out to be the equivalent of jumping out of a second story window and landing on a concrete walk. The ditch was deeper than I had expected and the surface at the bottom of the ditch was rock hard ice. My landing was not graceful. I hurt my left shoulder, but no bones were broken. Thank goodness my entire body was well padded with heavy winter clothing.

The fall rendered me almost unconscious and I lay dazed on the ice in the bottom of the ditch. A mental fog kept appearing and disappearing. My left shoulder ached horribly, my legs burned constantly, and my eyes would not focus. My future did not seem bright!

A scuffling noise above me brought me out of my dazed state and quickly into the

world of reality. A large body came sliding down the frozen side of the drainage ditch and came to rest behind me. I had a vivid flash-back to the night when a German soldier crawled into my fox hole. I panicked and screamed. A sturdy arm encircled me from the rear and a strong gloved hand covered my mouth. A hushed voice said, "Randy, stop screaming! Everything is OK. This is Dell."

I stopped screaming and my body went limp.

(Three)

Deep in the Ardennes Forest between Baraque de Fraiture and Odeigne, Belgium
23 December 1944 - 2000 Hours

Dell Miller and I agreed to take different escape routes when we reached the small creek bottom where the drainage ditch normally empted it's water. Neither Miller nor I had a map or a compass to guide us and had only a general idea of where we were. To make the situation worse, we had only a vague idea about the location of the area controlled by the American 82nd Airborne division. As I found out later, the hard way, the situation was still fluid, no front lines existed. In the area where we were, only small disorganized pockets of friends and foes existed.

We decided to take Captain Huxel's advice and try to work our way through the forest and reach Manhay. As the crow flied, the town of Manhay was about three miles northwest of our present location. By road, approximately five miles. Through the forest, we had no idea. Dell planned to walk about one mile due north toward the village of Fraiture, then turn west to reach Malempre and then on to Manhay.

My route would be south of Dell's and entailed walking west through the forest toward Odeinge and then North to Manhay. Of course neither of us knew what to expect

during our journey. We decided to travel at night, for security reasons, and to hide and rest during the day.

When we shook hands and parted, I hated to see my buddy leave. Suddenly I felt vulnerable, and miserably alone.

The weather was clear and cold, the temperature hovering around 15 degrees. Great weather for hypothermia and frozen feet. At night the plainly visible stars did give me a general sense of direction. After all, when I was a kid living in Cocoa, I did study elementary navigation while in the Sea Scouts.

There was no doubt in my mind about this trip, it was going to be tough. To stay alive and reach the American lines would be difficult. The deck seemed stacked against me. The enemy, inclement weather, no food, no heat, no shelter, the snow in the forest, and the dark increased the odds against me. I reasoned, what else can I do? I was not going to quit! I was going to give the chance of survival my best shot!

For more than eight hours I moved slowly, cautiously picking my way through deep snow and hanging limbs of the Ardennes forest. Occasionally, when I came to an opening in the forest created by a man made fire break, I glanced at the twinkling stars, trying to determine my location. I thought I had kept the Baraque de Fraiture to Manhay road on my right, but I had an odd feeling the road was farther to my right than I had intended. Had I stayed close, I would have been able to detect road noise, or see flashes of faint light. There was no man made noise audible in the forest, only the eerie sounds generated by mother nature.

At several locations during the journey I had smelled the smoke of burning wood.

The smell apparently came from widely scattered dwellings located in clearings in the forest. Instinct made me avoid the warmth, and possible food, probably available in these homes. I had no idea who occupied these buildings. German troops, American troops, Belgian civilians? I simply could not take a chance trying to finding out.
Getting half the distance to Manhay, maybe two and one half miles through the forest, had been my first nights goal. Even though battling the elements, fatigue, and lack of specific direction, I should have been able to struggle this distance in eight hours, however I did not know where I was.

Suddenly I stumbled into a cleared firebreak which ran to my right. Even though I felt I should not expose myself, I turned into the cleared firebreak hoping it would assist me in locating the road I was trying to follow. Without giving my decision much thought, I quickened my pace, trying to reach the Manhay road before daylight. Once I became reoriented I would seek cover in the forest. There I could rest and resume my journey at nightfall. I glanced at my GI wrist watch, the time was about 0430 hours. While in the firebreak I noticed a shadow move. I froze motionless in place. The shadow materialized, it was a German sentry. I was looking down the muzzle of a German Schmeisser 9mm Automatic Machine Pistol, a weapon capable of cutting me in half in less than five seconds. A guttural German voice commanded, "HALT!"

With no chance to shoulder my weapon, I slowly raised my hands above my head and clasped them on top of my steel helmet. Before my hands stopped moving, I was completely surrounded by members of the elite German 2nd SS Panzer Division. Whether I liked it or not, I was now a prisoner of the German army!

THE OD YEARS: WWII AMERICANA
CHAPTER TWENTY
THE ARDENNES OFFENSIVE - DAY 9
(One)
Temporary Forward Headquarters, German 11th SS-Panzerkorps
Ardennes Forest near Odeigne, Belgium
24 December 1944, 0700 Hours

SS-Sturmbannfuher, (Major) Frederick Rupp, a Waffen-SS intelligence officer, had been interrogating me for about an hour. He spoke fluent English, Oxford English, not American English. He had been alternating his interrogation approach between: good guy - bad guy - good guy - etc. He knew I was from the American 106th Infantry Division, he recognized my shoulder insignia. He had deduced I had been one of the defenders of the cross roads at Baraque de Fraiture, although I had not told his I was. He had asked me many questions I could not answer. Questions about supply depots, quartermaster units, troop dispositions. He was seeking strategic information to which no combat non-commissioned officer would have access. We both knew that under the rules of the Geneva Convention, the only information I was required to give him was my Name, Rank, and Army Serial Number. He had obtained this information more than an hour ago.

I could not make up my mind if this SS Major was really a bad guy, a good guy, or perhaps both. I knew one thing, his bad guy persona frightened me. I felt strongly that he could have me shot and have no regrets what-so-ever, if I pushed my luck and antagonized him. With this thought firmly in my mind, I continued to respectfully answer

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answer questions I thought would not furnish pertinent information to the enemy. What more information did he want? What information did I have that would be important to him? I didn't know! I concluded the more freely I talked without aggravating the Major, the longer I would live. He was now interrogating in his good guy mode and I had to guard against giving aid and comfort to the enemy. He was intelligent, well trained in his craft, and knew how to phrase his questions innocently.

"Sergeant, how old are you?"

"Sir, I became twenty-one years of age six days ago. December the 19th."

"How do you like being a professional soldier?"

"Major, I am not a professional soldier. I was drafted, I did not volunteer. I would much rather be a civilian."

"How much education do you have, Sergeant?"

"Do you mean formal education?"

"Yes Sergeant."

"Sir, I have completed one year of college."

"Do you plan to complete your undergraduate work after the war?"

"Major, if I survive the war and am financially able, I would like to return to college and get a degree."

"Speaking of surviving the war Sergeant, why did you fight so hard and bravely against a superior force at Baraque de Fraiture?"

I had to think about this question seriously. Even a naive artillery sergeant should know this question was 'loaded.' To stall for time to ponder this question, I said "That is

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a good question, Sir."

"Well Sergeant, if it is a good question, why do you hesitate to answer?"

"Sir, it is a good question, but there is no simple answer."

"Do you hate the German people and the Third Reich so much that you were prepared to sacrifice your life for such an unimportant cross road?"

Very carefully I began to answer his question, "First of all Major, I do not hate the German people. I confess I do not know much about the Third Reich. History and politics do not interest m The reason I fought hard and risked my life had nothing to do with history or ideology. My unit was surrounded and your people were trying to kill us. It was extremely personal. I fought very hard for only one reason. I wanted to survive, I did not want to die."

With a slight smile on his face the Major responded, "That is quite a scholarly answer from a first year college student. Which institution of higher learning did you attend?"

"The University of Florida. What university did you attend, Major?"

With a stern look on his face, and the tone of authority in his voice, the German Major replied, "Sergeant, I am the interrogator here, not you! You will refrain from asking me questions in the future! Do you understand?"

"I am sorry, Sir! I do not wish to offend you. I am just curious by nature."

"I happen to be an educated man. I received my undergraduate degree from Oxford University in England. My advanced degrees were awarded by the University of Berlin. Does that satisfy your curiosity, Sergeant?"

"To some degree Sir. You speak more perfect English than I do. I thought perhaps you might have been educated in England."

"You are very observant Sergeant. Under the circumstances, quite calm."

"Looks can be very deceiving Sir, I am quite concerned about several things."

"What things concern you Sergeant? Name them in order of importance."

"First Sir, are you going to have me killed?"

"Sergeant, I am an educated and sensitive man. I do not slaughter unarmed prisoners. However, your personal welfare depends upon how well you cooperate with your captors. What is your next concern?"

Major, I have not eaten in more than two days. I am hungry. Would it be possible for me to have some food?"

"You are in no position to bargain with me! For food or anything else. I advise you not to push me too hard. Do you understand me?"

"Yes Sir, completely. Possibly you did not understand my answer. I am very hungry and thirsty. You asked for my second concern. I am trying to cooperate with you by answering your question truthfully. I am not trying to bargain information for food. I doubt I possess information that would be of use to you. I am only a three stripe sergeant in the field artillery. My knowledge of important things is extremely limited."

"That is enough Sergeant. What is your next concern?"

Pulling up my left pant leg, I showed Major Rupp a portion of the ugly red and festering incendiary wounds I had received.

He looked surprised and asked, "Did you receive these wounds at the cross roads

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at Baraque de Fraiture? Have they been attended to?"

"Yes Sir, at the cross roads, and no Sir, they have not been attended to."

"Sergeant, I believe you have answered my questions truthfully. I have no more time. My interrogation is complete. I will now try to relieve some of your anxieties. I will not have you shot. My sergeant will see that you receive some food, although we do not have much to share. My sergeant will also obtain medical treatment for your wounds. After that you will be evacuated to the rear and be processed as a prisoner of war." Then surprisingly he let down his guard. Major Rupp answered my question about being basically a 'good guy' or a 'bad guy,' when he added, "Sergeant, good luck, I hope we both survive this war. If you are so fortunate, I advise you to resume your academic pursuits."

Immediately he was transformed into the role of captor again when he barked, at this sergeant, "Oberscharfuhrer Gruber, do you understand your orders? If so, remove the prisoner!" Sergeant Gruber saluted, motioned for me to precede him, and we left the warmth of Major Rupp's tent.

The German Sergeant Gruber carried out Major Rupp's orders very efficiently. After my wounds were cleansed, medicated and bandaged, and I had consumed a fairly large chunk of hard crusted dark bread and washed it down with a hot bowl of turnip soup I felt much better. Even though Gruber had treated me as Major Rupp had ordered he bothered me. He was a tough looking soldier, an SS Sergeant, the type of enemy who had a reputation for extreme cruelty. Even though Major Rupp seemed to be a decent man, I did not trust Sergeant Gruber! After my meal, Gruber motioned me into a holding

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area where other American prisoners were gathered. He motioned for me to squat in the snow, which I did immediately, my head bowed and looking at the snowy ground. I heard the crunch of crisp snow as Gruber walked toward me. I looked up and my heart literally stopped. The SS Sergeant was approaching with a professional fighting knife in his right hand and was looking directly at me with a determined look on his face. I bowed my head again, and awaited my fate.

You can appreciate how I felt when Sergeant Gruber placed his left hand on my right shoulder to steady me as I waited for my death blow. Also you can appreciate how relieved I was when the SS Sergeant started gently cutting the stitches which held the 106th Infantry Division insignia on the left shoulder of my outer garment, rather than cutting my throat. Thank goodness, Sergeant Gruber merely wanted a war trophy!

(Two)

Walking on a road headed West toward a German POW collection area

24 December 1944 - 1500 Hours

There were thirteen American prisoners walking East with me, in single file, on an almost deserted road which led away from the sounds of battle. We were guarded by three wounded German soldiers armed with Gewehr Model 24, 7.92mm, Czech made, Mauser bolt action rifles. The guards had mounted their K98k bayonets, but carried their weapons on their right shoulder in the sling position. One guard was at point position and led the ragged column. The second guard walked in the road opposite the middle of the column, while the third guard brought up the rear.

All the German guards were 'walking wounded.' The had two immediate objectives: First, get us back to the rear echelon Prisoner of War Processing Center. The

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Second: Get themselves to the nearest field hospital for treatment of their wounds. However, the objectives varied between the Guards depending upon the severity of his own specific wounds. For no apparent reason, the rear guard seemed to be the most seriously wounded of the three. Judging from the manner in which the guards carried their weapons and the lethargic appearance of the American prisoners, the guards apparently did not anticipate any serious problems from the Americans. They seemed to be concerned only with their ability; to walk the distance to the collection area, to survive their own wounds, and to endure the terrible winter weather.

While walking toward the German POW collection area, my mind became very active. I still would rather die honorably, rather than slowly 'rot to death' in a POW Stalag. While staging in England, one combat instructor made several points about how to act if you were unlucky enough to be captured by German troops, especially SS troops. He advised: Do not be insolent, do not show fear, and, do not look your captors in the eye. I had used this advice successfully while being interrogated. This same instructor had explained what to expect of the German Army when they moved you from the battle field to the rear echelon as a prisoner. He said the Germans are very methodical and follow standing instructions religiously. My current situation was a classic case, straight out of their military procedures manual. For a prisoner to escape while enroute from the battle field, this instructor explained the principle of straggling. Separate the guards from one another, with as much distance as possible. Walk slowly to buy valuable time, and break and run for cover when an opportunity presents itself. .

When we formed our march column, I tried to be the last American in line, but

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another GI fell in behind me. He, being the last, and me the next-to-last American in the column. Every now and then, I glanced at him. He wore jump boots and a unique type of outer jacket, which marked him as a paratrooper. As the column moved down the icy road, the prisoner in front of me started to struggle as we trudged along. The interval between him and the man in front of him was beginning to widen. It occurred to me he may be slowing his pace on purpose. Regardless of the reason, I decided to do the same. A quick look to the rear made me realize the intervals between me, the paratrooper, and our wounded guard, had increased also. The sluggish rear guard did not seem to detect the growing distance between him and the middle guard in front of us. Possibly he was so preoccupied with his own wounds he did not care. With the three rear prisoners now playing the straggling game combined with the physical problems of the rear guard, the distance between the rear and middle guards had become significant.

Within and hour, the column had become quite long. It had stretched to the length that the rear and lead guards could no longer see each other when we negotiated sharp turns in the road. The rear guard was walking slowly, head down, as if in pain. For me, the decision was not difficult. I made up my mind, I would break from the column and run the next time we lost sight of the lead guard. If lucky, I would be able to reach dense tree cover before either the center or rear guard could react and fire their weapons. All my senses sharpened as I looked toward the head of the column. There appeared to be a sharp bend in the road ahead as it turned abruptly to the left. There was heavy snow covered foliage on both sides of the road at the turn. Thinking this would be the place, I decided to run left. If successful in not getting shot, I would then move deeper into the

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forest and hide until dark. I felt it was highly unlikely that any of the wounded guards would abandon their remaining prisoners and try to recapture me.

The curve in the road came closer and the lead guard disappeared from sight. The American in front of me almost stopped walking, intently watching the progress of the center guard. The split second the center guard vanished from sight around the bend in the road, the American in front of me bolted and ran swiftly into the forest on our right. This movement was all the catalyst I needed to jar me into action. For some reason before starting to run, I glanced at the rear guard. He was almost one hundred yards behind me and stooped over looking at the airborne trooper who was squatting in the center of the road, obviously in physical distress. From this distance I saw the trooper suddenly straighten his body and simultaneously strike the wounded German guard flush on the chin. The force of the blow was backed by all the leg and right arm power the rugged trooper could muster. This vicious martial arts blow dislodged the heavy German helmet and sent it and the guard's rifle crashing to the ground. The whip-lash effect on the guard's neck was similar to that caused by a severe rear end automobile collision. Immediately the guard fell to the ground badly hurt, or unconscious.

Like a tiger springing on a crippled prey, the trooper lunged at the dazed guard and lifted his rifle from the ground. With a classic infantry move the trooper smashed the unprotected head of the German guard with the steel butt-plate of the wooden rifle stock. The trooper never looked in my direction as he dropped the German rifle and fled into the forest. By the time I reached the prone German body the trooper had disappeared into the mist and snow of the Ardennes Forest. The whole incident happened so quickly I

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was not prepared for the final scene. The fatally wounded German soldier was lying in a puddle of blood with both arms extended and his hands faintly grasping the cold air. But worst of all, I saw the pleading look on the German's face, as if he was asking me for help. I did the only thing I knew to do. I picked up this rifle and plunged the bayonet through his heart, killing him instantly.

This whole experience disturbed me deeply! What else could I do? With a futile wave of my arms, I moved off of the road and into the cover of the forest, and did the only thing I knew to do. I ran, and ran, and ran . . .

THE OD YEARS: WWII AMERICANA
CHAPTER TWENTY ONE
THE ARDENNES OFFENSIVE - DAY 11
(One)
Totally Lost in the Ardennes Forest
26 December 1944, 0500 Hours

For two nights I had wandered through the Ardennes Forest, hopelessly lost. While moving under the cover of darkness, I had lost all feel for direction and distance. In fact, once I caught myself traveling in a circle when I crossed my own foot prints in the snow. The past day had been spent hiding, burrowed into a snow bank which surrounded the base of a huge tree, trying to avoid the biting arctic air. I was out of food and afraid to eat more snow to ease my thirst and hunger pangs because my body temperature was already too low. Debilitating exhaustion had set in and I needed rest. I also needed to find another place to hide because it would soon be

daylight. Fortunately, I wandered into a cleared field which contained large mounds of snow. An examination of the closest mound revealed it to be a stack of hay, covered with snow. Even though I knew a farm house must be near and I thought it best to avoid farm houses, I could go no farther.

Physically and mentally spent, it took a superhuman effort for me to claw my way into the middle of the enormous hay stack. When I formed a living cavity in the hay, I was able to make myself a soft bed and pillow of hay several inches above the frozen ground. I then covered the entrance hole I had made in the hay stack and lay resting in the total darkness. My ever present hunger pains forcefully told me I had not eaten during

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the two days since my German captors fed me turnip soup and black bread. Fatigue, hunger, and apprehension, coupled with the 15 degree temperature, were taking their toll.

In the darkness, the interior of the hay stack felt comparatively warm and secure. The air had the smell of musty hay. For no particular reason, I stuck a sprig of dry hay into my mouth and started to chew. The taste was not what I would call appetizing, but it wasn't too bad either. My mind started wandering as my body started to relax. I thought, "Where can I find some food? When? Where are the American lines? Am I safely hidden in the hay stack?" The last question I remember asking myself was, "How did I manage to get myself into this stinking rotten mess?" When sleep came, it came suddenly, like a drawn curtain. My body was weak and exhausted, however, my subconscious mind was still active. Instinctively I knew I was not safe, even while well hidden in the interior of this snow covered hay stack. There was always the danger that I might make a noise, a cough, a sneeze, or snore while asleep. I did not know where I was nor did I know who might lurk outside my frozen hideaway.

My short period of sleep ended abruptly. All of a sudden I was wide awake in the darkness of the hay stack. My heart beat rapidly. With every instinct focused on the world outside the hay stack, I lay silently trying to determine why my adrenaline was flowing so freely. Finally I sensed movement outside the hay stack and wondered, "Was it man or beast, or merely the wind?" "If it was man, was he friend or foe?" "Would the man move on and pass me by, or would he detect me?" "Would the man rescue or try to kill me?" The suspense was terrifying! I was unarmed, unable to fight, and I could not flee. All I could do was lie there, pray, and wait in silence. I could hardly force myself

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to take a breath! Suddenly the darkness of the hay stack was penetrated by a bright shaft of light which blinded me. An excited voice yelled into the breeched hay stack, "ROUSE, you KRAUT Son-of-a-Bitch! If you don't come out with your hands over your head, I'll blow your FUCKING brains out!"

With a voice squeaking under the stress, I yelled through dry, cracked lips, "Don't shoot, I'm unarmed! I'm an American! I'll come out head first on my hands and knees."

With equal emotion, the voice outside of the hay stack yelled, "You English speaking KRAUT BASTARD, if you come out head first, I'll blow your fucking brains out. You better get down on your hands and knees and back out slowly, Very Slowly, ass first. Do you understand me?"

"Of course I understand you. I told you I am an American. I'm going to start backing out right now, slowly. For Christ's sake don't get trigger happy. I don't want to get shot in the ass. As a matter of fact, I don't want to get shot any where."

The voice outside still sounded nervous as it responded, "OK, come on out slowly, ass first, and keep both hands on the ground. When I tell you to STOP, you damned well better STOP, and don't move. You got anybody else in there with you?"

"No, I don't have anyone else in here with me, I'm by myself. I'm coming out ass first, very slowly, with both hands on the ground. When you say stop, I'll stop. I don't want any trouble. I've got enough trouble already, I don't need any more."

"Don't try to soft soap me you Kraut Bastard." The voice then yelled in the opposite direction, "Sergeant, send a squad over here. I just found a fucking Kraut in this hay stack."

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Off in the distance I could faintly hear an American voice responding, "OK Kennedy, I'll send over a squad. Keep him pinned down and don't kill him unless you have to. Remember we are supposed to bring in prisoners for interrogation."

"OK Sarge, but if the SOB even breaths hard, I'll blow him a new ass hole with my M-1."

"Kennedy, I said don't kill him unless you have to. We need prisoners. This is not a combat patrol, it is an intelligence patrol. We need prisoners to tell us who is in front of us and what their plans are."

All this chit-chat between an American Sergeant and his man Kennedy made me feel better. At least they were not Germans, they were friend lies on an intelligence mission, not a search-and-destroy mission. But as I started to back out of the hay stack on my hands and knees, I still did not trust this clown named Kennedy, who ever he was. I had a strong feeling he would like to kill this 'Fucking Kraus Bastard' even though I had insisted I was an American. Backing out of the hay stack was much harder than crawling in head first. My legs were numb, my stomach was cramping, either from fear or hunger, I didn't know which, and of course I could not see where I was going. That, of course, is what Kennedy wanted. Maybe he wasn't so dumb after all. As my legs started to break out of the hay stack, Kennedy yelled, "Slow down!" I yelled back, "I can't see what I am doing, damn it." Again, Kennedy instructed me to keep coming back slowly until he could see my ass.

His attitude was beginning to piss me off and I yelled back, "How in the Hell am I supposed to know when you can see my ass if I can't turn around to see where you are?"

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For the first time I could sense the fact that Kennedy was now beginning to feel in control of the situation because he actually chuckled when he answered, "You'll know, you'll know!" To keep him happy, I continued to back out of the hay stack. Suddenly I felt the hard cold steel of a 30-caliber M-1 Rifle poking me in the rear end and I heard a rather jubilant Kennedy announcing, "Now you know I can see your ass Kraut Baby." He also announced to someone else, "Now his Kraut ass is mine!"

Another voice said rather firmly, "OK Kennedy we have him covered, let him out." As I emerged from the hay stack, the same voice said, "He looks American to me. He is wearing GI boots and fatigues."

"That doesn't mean a thing Sarge," Kennedy explained, "Lots of Krauts Bastards dressed in GI clothes have infiltrated our lines and are wandering around loose. I still think he is a German."

The other voice said, "I know that Kennedy. The way he is dressed doesn't make any difference, he is still our prisoner. We'll take him back to Regiment and let the S-2 (Intelligence Officer) figure out who and what he really is."

With much wiggling and straining I finally backed completely out of the hay stack. I remained on my hands and knees, facing the hay stack, afraid to turn and face my captors, or liberators, I knew not which. The bright sun light glancing off of the snow covered hay stack hurt my eyes. I had to blink constantly until my eyes adjusted to the light. Finally the Airborne Sergeant spoke, "Let him up Kennedy, I want to see what he looks like from the front side."

Kennedy removed his rifle barrel from my rear end, and with authority, ordered

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me to get on my feet and turn around. Slowly, very slowly, I started to stretch and straighten my body. Again, slowly I raised my arms and interlocked my fingers on the top of my head. Only then did I turn to face the group. There were six of them, a typical infantry squad, standing separated by several feet as a well trained squad should be, all covering me with various types of weapons. They were dressed in airborne jump boots and airborne type fatigues. Only the Sergeant did not have his weapon trained on me. The Sergeant approached me and said briefly "You are a prisoner of the U. S. Army! Do you understand?"

Feeling a little more confident now that my captors would not shoot an unarmed man, I answered, "Of course I understand. I told you I am and American."

The Sergeant looked at me with no expression on his face and said to the squad in general, "We have done our job, lets move out and get this prisoner back to Regiment." He turned to Kennedy and said, "Good job Ken, put the prisoner in the middle of our column and move the squad out." With no reply, Kennedy motioned for me to fall-in behind the first three GI's and we started walking away from the hay stack in the bright sun lit snow of the Ardennes Forest.

My feelings were mixed as the column made its way through the deep snow. My left leg and both feet ached from the cold, my right shoulder felt as though I had broken something during my head-first dive into the drainage ditch when I escaped through the German encirclement at the Cross Roads. Added to these thoughts was the fact that these American Airborne troops who "captured" me still thought I was a German soldier. On the other hand, even though I was very hungry, I was alive, and in the company of American troops headed for the American lines.

I felt strongly that my Heavenly Father had assigned Guardian Angels to protect me so far, consequently, I prayed for him to assign these same Angels to protect me in the future. They had done a great job.

Randolph C. Pierson
Former Captain, Field Artillery, USAR.

EPILOG

Since you have read my memoirs entitled "Where an American Field Artillery Battalion Died," perhaps you would be interested in the unique facts concerning the "Birth" of this Battalion.

After NAZI Germany invaded Poland in 1939 and the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941, by Japan, the Government of the United States realized America would soon be forced to fight serious aggression in two separate portions of the

world, The Pacific, and also The North Africa - European Area. To accomplish this difficult undertaking, the Department of Army started a program to form and train additional US Army Divisions. One such unit was the brand new triangular division, designated the 106th Infantry Division. The circular Division Insignia consisted of red and white outer circles with a blue background containing the Head of a Golden Lion.

The 106th Infantry Division, which included the 589th Field Artillery Battalion was activated, or "Born," 15 March 1943 at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. The backbone, or Cadre, of the 589th FA BN consisted of trained officers and senior non-commissioned officers obtained from the existing 80th Division. The average age of the troops, including officers, of the newly formed 106th Infantry Division was about 21 years of age. I had just turned 19.

From mid-March 1943, until late-December 1943, inductees, including myself, received Basic Training, Field Artillery Unit Training, and Combined (Artillery & Infantry) Unit Training at Fort Jackson. From early January, through mid-March 1944, the 589th Field Artillery Battalion experienced the rigors of the miserable Tennessee Winter Maneuvers. Upon completion of these maneuvers, the 589th FA Bn motor-marched from Tennessee to our new home at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. In late-March 1944 we started Advanced Unit Training with the 422nd Infantry Regiment of the 106th Infantry Division. Needless-to-say, the living accommodations at Camp Atterbury were so much superior to the Spartan outdoor living in Tennessee, the men of the 589th thought they had died and gone to heaven.

Life at Camp Atterbury, with easy access to a great city like Indianapolis, and the "soldier friendly" people of the area, was very pleasant for me, an unmarried, 19 year-old Sergeant. But this good life came to a halt in October 1944, when the division received orders to entrain, and move to Camp Miles Standish, Massachusetts, a military staging camp used in conjunction with the Port of Boston to accommodate troops bound for Europe. Boston was also "soldier friendly" to troops on their way to war. Even though all troops going through the Port of Boston were sworn to secrecy because "Loose Lips Sink Ships," most people in the Boston area recognized the strange unit insignias worn on our shoulders and knew the wearer was not stationed locally.

Our stay in the Boston area was extremely pleasant, but much too short, for a "Three Striper" with no duties to restrain his activities. Places like Scully Square, the USO, the Silver Dollar Bar, and the Old Howard bring fond memories to mind. The 589th FA Bn, along with about 15,000 other troops left the Boston Port of Embarkation aboard the US Coast Guard Ship Wakefield on 11 November 1944. At the time, the Wakefield was one of the largest luxury liners ever built in America, but when converted to a troop transport ship it certainly was not a luxury liner!

The USCGS Wakefield did not travel in a convoy, but utilized its speed and zigzag maneuvering ability to avoid German U-Boats during our trip over the stormy North Atlantic. After a rough, but uneventful journey, she arrived in Liverpool, England 15 November 1944. During our brief staging process in England, we were issued new weapons, ammunition, vehicles, clothing, and field rations. We also received personalized training from combat hardened British soldiers on what to expect, on a personal level, once committed to combat. What I learned during these training sessions - Techniques of Knife Fighting, and How to Escape If Captured, probably saved my life.

With all new equipment and supplies, we motor-marched from our staging area, near Gloucester, to Portland Harbor near Waymouth, England on 1 December 1944. The following day the battalion started loading onto an LST (Landing Ship Tank) for our crossing of the rough English Channel. Inclement weather caused the US Navy delays in delivering us past the port of LeHarve, France, to our landing point on the banks of the Seine River near Rouen, France.

On 8 December 1944, we completed the motor-march from Rouen, France to the advance headquarters of the 106th Infantry Division at St. Vith, Belgium. There we received our first orders of battle. The following day, 9 December 1944, the 589th FA Bn relieved the 15th Field Artillery Battalion of the battle scared 2nd Infantry Division We operated as a normal field artillery battalion in this position until 15 December 1944. The method and tempo of combat quickened suddenly the next day, 16 December 1944, the beginning of "The Battle of the Bulge." We were then forced to fight like Infantry and Tank Destroyers. What was left of the 589th Field Artillery Battalion was finally overwhelmed by elements of the 2nd Panzer Division at Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium on 23 December 1944 - "The Place an American Artillery Battalion Died.".

Please allow me to express a few thoughts. I was privileged to have served my country with young men of dedication, firm morale fiber, and a sense of personal responsibility. The men I fought with at "Parker's Crossroads" were such men. These men were buddies, friends and total strangers, but they all pulled together and got a critical job done. They helped shorten and win the war. WWII consisted of hundreds, if not thousands, of battles like "The Battle for Parker's Crossroads" but I have written only of my own experiences, not the experiences of others.

In May 1945, at the end of WWII in Europe, two 2nd Lieutenants, Barney Alford and Randolph Pierson, sat in a jeep, drinking Cognac and discussing their future, while watching the beautiful afternoon sun sink beneath the tree line of a distant hill. Both young men were as relaxed as they had been in two years. Looking at his watch, Lieutenant Alford said, "Randy, I have to get back to my battery" as he started the motor of his jeep. I eased myself out of his jeep and onto the ground and told him, "Thanks for the bottled cheer Barney, it was just what the doctor ordered, See you tomorrow at officer's call." Barney paused for just a moment as he started to leave my battery area and asked, "Randy, what would the world have been like if we had failed?"

Parker's Crossroads

Note from Randy: *Being a member of the 106th Infantry Division during the Battle of the Bulge was not pleasant regardless of your assignment. As a T/4, I worked in the 589th Field Artillery Battalion Fire Direction Center. Major Arthur C. Parker, III, the Battalion S-3, was my big boss.*

The intent of this fully documented article is intended to explain the relationship with "The Battle for Parker's Crossroads" and the historical military analysis of "The Alamo Defense." This article is not intended to de-emphasize the importance of other heroic defenses which happened during the Battle of the Bulge which are now erroneously depicting these defenses as an "Alamo Defense."

The Battle for Parker's Crossroads

For more than 2,500 years, military leaders have pondered one simple question: What motivates some men to stand and fight, while others run, or become immobilized by fear? In 1993 a military historian, Mr. Richard Raymond, III, at the artillery School in Front Sill, Oklahoma, addressed this issue with an award winning analysis entitled *"The Alamo Defense."* In his analysis Mr. Raymond chose two famous historical battles, the heroic battle of Thermophile, fought in 480 BC, the battle at the Alamo which was fought in Texas in 1836, and the little known 5-day WWII battle for Parker's Crossroads, fought in December 1944 at Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium, during the Battle of the Bulge.

Parker's Crossroads, July 1945 (Photo Richard Peterson)

My interest in Mr Raymond's analysis of the *"Alamo Defense"* is very personal. I fought during the entire 5-day battle and never thought I would survive the ever-increasing pressure of over-whelming enemy attacks and/or the deadly cold of horrible weather.

This holding action began on 19 December 1944, my 21st birthday. The stated purpose of this holding action was to deny the use of the main highway, which ran from Bastogne to Antwerp, by the two reinforced German SS 2nd and SS 9th Panzer Divisions, during the Bulge. This main route supported the German objectives of driving a wedge between the British and U.S. Armies, and also establishing a much-needed seaport to the North Sea.

Orders were issued to Major Arthur C. Parker III, Acting Commanding Officer, 589th FA Bn, 106th Infantry Division. The mission, *"Hold this ground as long as humanly possible."*

When this order was received, the 589th, a once proud and well-trained battalion, with some 500 men and officers, and equipped with twelve 105mm howitzers, had already been reduced to 100 men and three howitzers by combat attrition. I could not understand the importance of given mission because I did not know how important it

was to the German high command to use this highway through Liege and Brussels to get to the needed seaport City of Antwerp.

Fortunately, for the Allies, Majors Parker and Elliott Goldstein understood the importance of denying this highway to the enemy. After their reconnoitered the area, they setup our defensive positions and decided to *"Stand Here and Fight."*

The German attacks of the defenders at Baraque de Fraiture increased steadily each day, in numbers and violence for five days and four nights. The weather did not help--it was miserable, sleet ice and snow, with temperatures hovering around zero. On the fifth day, 23 December, the 589th defenders were down to about 40 men and no howitzers. Ammunition was scare, food was low, and Resupply was not possible. German units had us completely surrounded.

The afternoon of 23 December, Captain George Huxel, the Assistant S-3, the only officer left standing, advised each enlisted man that the situation here is hopeless. That we have given our best, and each man had to make his own decision. *" Try to escape through the German encirclement, and reach ground near Manhay, Belgium, held by 82nd Airborne Division, or remain and be killed or captured."* He also added, *"I am going to try to escape,"* and offered to lead the group who wanted to leave. After making my decision to leave, I made another decision. I felt I had a better chance of surviving, by myself, than with Captain Huxel and his group.

My escape was a disaster! I was wounded, and later captured, the night of 23rd December by members of the German 2nd SS Panzer Division; interrogated by a German Intelligence Major on the 24th. This terrifying experience lasted for more than three hours, while he played *"Good Guy/Bad Guy"* to keep me off balance. I tried my best to convince him that I had no strategic information for him. At the end of my interrogation, he asked: *"Why did you fight so hard at Baraque de Fraiture? Do you hate the Germans so much?* My answer was very calculated, *"I don't hate the Germans, but your men were trying to kill me."* He smiled, and then he asked, *"Sergeant have any personal concerns?"*

Without hesitation, I answered, *"Yes, Sir! First, are you going to have me killed? Second, my wounded leg and frozen feet need medical attention. And third, I have not eaten in two."*

With out comment, the SS Major summoned a huge SS sergeant and terminated the interrogation with these orders in German. *"I have given my word that this young American sergeant will not be executed. His wounds and feet need medical attention. Give him what food we can spare. Sergeant, he is now your responsibility."* As I was leaving his tent, the German major turned to me and in English told me, *"Sergeant Pierson, I hope you survive this ugly war. If you do, I advise you to finish your college education."* I saluted my thanks and never saw the man again.

Late 23 December afternoon, an 82nd Airborne Division trooper and I were being guarded by a wounded SS Corporal as we walked to a POW collection center. To my

surprise, the trooper suddenly bent over as if in pain, the guard approached him, and the trooper dropped the SS guard with a vicious right hand upper-cut. I caught the German's rifle as it flew into the air, out of his hands, and pinned him to the frozen ground with a vicious bayonet thrust through his chest. The trooper and I instantly broke into a hard run for the fast and snowy Ardennes forest. He in one direction and I in another.

The morning of 24 December I was captured by an 82nd Airborne Division intelligence patrol, while asleep in a haystack. I say captured, not rescued, because I was treated like a German soldier dressed in an American uniform. Later, I was court-marshalled and told I would be hot. But that is another story!

With all due respect to the heroic stands of the 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne, and the 99th Division's five-hour *"Alamo Defense"* in the Ardennes, they do not qualify as an *"Alamo Defense"* according to the criteria historian Richard Raymond established for an *"Alamo Defense."* Our stand at *"Parker's Crossroads"* does.

Mr Raymond concludes his analysis with these facts. The 589th Field Artillery Battalion was awarded the French Croix de Guerre for these gallant actions during the Battle of the Bulge. Unfortunately the U.S. Government did not recognize this gallant effort. However, our government did award Major Arthur C. Parker III, the Silver Star for what Mr Raymond described as a clear *"Medal of Honor"* performance. I was there and fully agree with Mr Raymond's conclusion!

In a German Army after action report, a high ranking SS Panzer commander wrote that he had participated in many violent battles on the Northern Front in Russia, but the defense at Baraque de Fraiture, Belgium, in December 1944, was the most violent he had experienced in his extensive combat career.

In a letter of Major Parker, dated July 2, 1980, from Lieutenant General James M. Gavin, former commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, said, and I quote: *"That stand your defenders made at the crossroads was one of the greatest actions of the war."*

General Gavin should know. The 5-day holding action by the 589th Field Artillery Battalion bought enough time for General Gavin to redeploy enough American forces to stop the German advance short of Liege in January 1945.

This short statement by General Gavin *"Says It All."*

Source: Bulge Bugle, February 2009
http://www.battleofthebulgememories.be/stories26/us-army25/659-parkers-crossroads.html
Henri ROGISTER, webmaster