

War looks different with your boots on the front line.

## **GROWING UP IN A FOXHOLE**

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## CHAPTER 7: Foul-Ups, Mishaps, and Narrow Escapes

After sleeping out all winter it was good to know that warmer weather was coming—and to get the word we would be moving out shortly. We still had to dig foxholes every night but just for one, just big enough to give a little protection from enemy shelling or sniping.

We were stationed for a few days in a little French town called Wimeneau. One of my buddies approached me one afternoon and asked if I'd like some boiled chicken. He told me he had found a chicken wandering around behind a barn so he took it (spelled s-t-o-l-e) with the idea of cooking it that night. This had to be a top secret undertaking because stealing from civilians was a serious offense. I just assumed this country boy knew what he was doing. He invited another one of our buddies and I had no doubt when the three of us met that night in the cellar of an old barn that this was going to be a fine evening.

It was pitch black in that cellar and all we had for light was the small fire he had built to cook the chicken over. He filled his steel helmet with water and tossed in the chicken, plucked, gutted, and cut up. For the fire we were using a few empty K-ration containers. With their waxed coating they burned very nicely. As it cooked, it sure smelled good.

After an hour or so, our buddy fished out a piece of chicken with his bayonet and tested it to see if it was done. He said it tasted pretty good so we all tried it. It was tender and actually quite flavorful. We ate the whole thing, put out the fire and headed back to the house where we were billeted. I was in the attic with several

*A FOOT SOLDIER LOOKS BACK*

others and we all slept on the floor. About 2 o'clock that morning I woke up with a terrible stomachache that quickly let me know I was going to have to beat it to the outside latrine on the double.

I made it to the top step when it hit me full force: I left a trail from the attic all the way to the ground floor and into the latrine. My belly was so bloated I couldn't fasten my pants. I stayed outside the rest of the night. By morning I found out that my two chicken-eating buddies were suffering the same fate. It appears the chicken had not been fully cooked and we had eaten it raw.

And of course that wasn't all. The woman who owned the house contacted our commanding officer, demanding that the person or persons who had crapped all the way from the attic to the first floor, be made to clean it up. I think her husband reported a chicken missing. Our commanding officer did not need to ask who was responsible. We had guilt written all over us. He had a talk with us and decided we had been punished enough. He sent us to the first-aid station where we were given some paregoric. To our great relief, it went to work right away. In case you're wondering who cleaned up the mess, I don't know, but it wasn't me. I think it was well over a year before I could eat chicken again.

When the orders came down to move on out, we left, as usual, having no idea where we were headed. Those decisions were not ours. Our job was to take whatever objectives we had been delegated to capture or occupy that day. On the way to one of these objectives we ran into a natural obstacle: a frozen canal. Since the ice was not thick enough to walk across, we thought we could take a little running start and jump.

*GROWING UP IN A FOXHOLE: 1944-1946*

After all, it was only about eight feet wide. The first guy to jump took off his heavy coat, field jacket and helmet. He handed his rifle to the fellow who would be jumping next. There was a little bit of ground extending into the canal that shortened the distance to three or four good running steps. He made it without any problem. Then the next fellow threw him his gear and he did the same thing. I was the last one to make the jump, and I didn't fare as well. After I had thrown my rifle and gear across to one of the guys, I managed to land on the little piece of ground on the other side, but it had become weakened from all the jumps before me and so it broke off when I hit. I went through the ice into the canal.

I was immediately pulled out but I was soaked through. There were no dry clothes to put on and my platoon had to keep moving on. I was told to get back to headquarters as soon as possible. I found a foot bridge about 100 yards up from where we had crossed. Then I had to hike about half a mile to the building housing our headquarters.

By the time I got there I was shaking uncontrollably. I was taken over to the fireplace where a good fire was going and immediately stripped down. Someone brought me towels and helped rub me down, and someone got me some hot coffee. Finally, the shakes quit and I started to feel human again. My clothes had been dried by the fire and were toasty and ready to put on again. As I dressed, I was thinking that I'd be able to stay the night in the nice warm building—maybe on a real bed.

About that time an officer came by and asked me how I was doing. I told him I felt great. In that case, he said, report back to your outfit. I should have lied. The end result was my sleeping out in the cold and snow,

*A FOOT SOLDIER LOOKS BACK*

again, with my buddies. Some officers just had no compassion for us poor front-line infantry boys.

In fact, that was one thing we all hated. As infantrymen, we took pride in our unit, and didn't take kindly to it when the rear echelon brass gave front-line duty to anyone who fouled up in the rear. As a result we got some pretty sorry characters. However, it didn't take us long to give them an "attitude adjustment." All we had to do was make them first scout one day and second scout the next day. The duty of the first scout is to lead the squad by going out in front about 30 or 40 yards to see if he can draw any enemy fire. The second scout follows by a few yards and tries to ascertain where any fire may be coming from.

Our intent was to get the message across that they were going to have to rely on us if they wanted to survive and we had to be able to rely on them. This was the quickest and most efficient, albeit a very dangerous way to make these guys realize that we weren't playing games. I think they all got the message when they realized they could be killed at any time. One fellow sent up to the front with us had been a sergeant with the 8th Air Force in England. Whatever he had done must have been pretty serious to get shipped out of England. As I recall, he turned out to be a good soldier.

Like night patrol, serving as first and second scout was also rotational. I think I had a fatalistic view about my turns as first scout. Having learned that the German snipers were excellent marksmen, able to kill you with one shot to the head, I figured that if one got me, I would never know what hit me.

One time when I was first scout, a sniper decided to let me get closer so he could shoot and kill the second scout, who was about 20 yards to my rear, and then

*GROWING UP IN A FOXHOLE: 1944-1946*

knock me off, an easy mark since I was even closer. When I heard the second scout get hit, I immediately hit the ground and rolled a few times. I think the sniper took off after the first shot, realizing his plan had failed. The second scout had been killed instantly. I guess it was by the grace of God, that the sniper had decided that day to take out the second scout rather than the first.

I remember one obnoxious joker who had been sent up by the CO from the rear. He thought he didn't have to do anything he didn't want to. He never said a good word about anything or anybody. He was another pain in the ass like the corporal we had in basic training. However, that was going to change. On his first day with us, we made him first scout. After a few yards, he turned around and asked why we weren't coming. We told him that we were waiting for him to get shot so we'd know where the enemy was located. You should have seen the look on his face. He changed his ways fast! No more wise-ass attitude from that boy.

Two foul-ups that had been sent to us were *really* no good. In all our efforts to straighten them out, nothing seemed to work. Looking back, I'm surprised they didn't go AWOL. After a heavy firefight one day, they were found hiding in a barn. Our platoon sergeant decided they needed a real "talking to" and went in the barn after them. No one saw what happened, but the guys came out with bloody noses and body bruises. The sergeant managed to get them transferred out of our unit.

I know I wasn't getting a sound night's sleep, but I didn't really feel that tired most of the time. It did catch up with me one day, however. We were advancing to an area known to be occupied by Germans. I had crawled

*A FOOT SOLDIER LOOKS BACK*

up an open patch of field to the crest of a small hill. I found bushes I could hide behind and still see through. Nothing was moving ahead of me. I hadn't heard any word from our sergeant to continue the advance.

Our sergeant, who was in command of our platoon of approximately 22 men at that time, got his orders from our platoon officer who in turn got his orders from the company commander. The commander was at times a few hundred yards behind us, but sometimes, when there was close fighting, he was with us almost side by side. We had a lot of casualties and our platoon officers didn't last long. Our sergeant, on the other hand, seemed to lead a charmed life. He always came through a firefight.

Anyway, I must have shut my eyes for a moment. I awoke with a start to see one of our tanks parked about three feet from me. Tanks make a lot of noise when they're on the move and you feel the ground shake. I hadn't heard it come up so I guess I was sleeping hard.

All that day I found myself wondering whether the tanker had seen me or not. He never came out of his tank or even opened the hatch, so I couldn't ask him. If he hadn't seen me, I could have been flattened. On the other hand, maybe he hadn't seen me and just missed me, or maybe he saw me and decided to just pull up to park for a while. Thinking about it later, I would hate to have been killed accidentally. Of course, I wouldn't have known it, so why worry?

On some overcast nights if we were suspecting a German counterattack or if we wanted to advance under cover of darkness we had the support of "artificial moonlight," actually, an Army unit to our rear. It reminded me of back home when a movie theater was showing a "blockbuster" and rigged up two or three huge

*GROWING UP IN A FOXHOLE: 1944-1946*

searchlights to traverse the sky in search mode. Our army unit would shine their searchlights on the clouds in a similar way, except the lights were not moving about. The reflection would give us just enough light to let us detect any movement in front of our position. Although the Germans could see us as well, we were more intent on finding open fields that may have been mined. The night my platoon went through the minefield, I'm sure we hadn't called for any artificial moonlight.

While we were going through the forests of the Vosges mountains, I couldn't see more than about 50 yards ahead of me. All I could see was, perhaps 10 or 15 buddies working their way through. The day we got through the forest, we came to the open expanse of clear land. It's only a guess but I'd say it was open for at least a mile to my left and right and probably one half mile to a big hill in front of me. As I looked to my right, my platoon and several others were exiting the woods about the same time. I hadn't seen that many GIs, probably only 40 or 50, in a long time. With that many, I thought, there was no way the Germans were going to win.

We advanced across the field, toward the hill, which was on the outskirts of a town we were going to capture. Suddenly we saw someone riding a bicycle along the road that headed into town. We immediately opened fire on him, but not a single shot hit him. He hadn't seen us until we started shooting. When he realized what was happening, he stopped the bike, got off, raised his hands over his head and yelled, "Kamerad, schiesen nicht," (don't shoot). He was an old man who had been to see a friend and was returning home. We told him to stay where he was and not to try to warn anybody. I think he was so scared, he couldn't move a muscle.



*A FOOT SOLDIER LOOKS BACK*

Nobody was shooting at us as we started up the hill: a good sign, I thought. Where all the civilians were at this time, I don't know. At least they stayed out of our way. As I reached the crest of the hill, I could see over several houses. At that instant, I heard machine gun fire and right in front of me I could see dust being kicked up from where the bullets were hitting. The trail was leading directly to me. Army training had made it almost a reflex: in a fraction of a second, I dropped and rolled to my right to avoid getting hit. It turned out to be a lone German soldier manning the gun from a church steeple. He was captured and that was that.

The Germans at this stage of the game were retreating at a fast pace, but one or two would be left behind to pick off any foot soldier they could. For them, it was almost a certainty they would be killed.

One event I remember vividly. We had reached the shore of the Danube. We were going to cross in small boats at a very narrow point of the river. We could see across on the other side of the river about 20 German soldiers waiting to surrender to us. As one of our boats got about halfway across, it capsized. What happened then was amazing. Three or four of the German soldiers took off their heavy coats and boots and jumped in to grab the GIs flailing about in the water, clearly unable to swim. They did get them out safely and they certainly scored a lot of points that day. You can't shoot somebody who just saved your life.

I think it was the Saar River we were crossing another time when we had a scary incident, even though looking back on it we laughed. There were about 20 of us in a large landing ship tank (LST) built to carry troops and supplies. There were a few more making the river crossing at the time. Further down the river, a huge

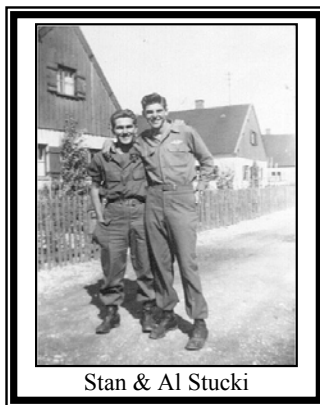
*GROWING UP IN A FOXHOLE: 1944-1946*

debris fire was burning next to a bombed-out bridge. Our boat master got us going across the river when suddenly the engine quit. He tried to get it going again but didn't seem to be having much luck. The boat was drifting right toward the fire and we certainly could not jump in the river with all our gear on.

We were all starting to panic—we sure didn't want to die under those circumstances. A couple of GIs pointed their rifles at the boat master and told him he'd die before we would if he didn't get the ^#&\$(#\_\*) engine started. On the next try the engine sprang to life and we got across in record time. Like I say, it's only when you survive that these stories are funny.

One cold night we were camped near a river, and from the other shore we heard German soldiers singing a song. It was so pretty that we joined in singing it with them. We didn't know the words but with the help of Al Stucki, who was fluent in German, we were soon able to sing it in German. The name of the song was "Lili Marlene." The famous singer Hildegard made it one of the most popular war songs ever. (She died in 2005 at the age of 99.) That was another incident that enabled us to forget that we were enemies, even if it was for just one evening.

At that time, we weren't getting shot at every day; in fact, some days we had it pretty easy and would sit around shooting the breeze. One day we were guarding a German POW camp and one of the truck drivers who was going to transport them to another camp told us about these



*A FOOT SOLDIER LOOKS BACK*

trips. Apparently, he had to have a certain number of prisoners standing up in the back, and some of them would give him a hard time when a few would pile on and there was no room for any more. Smirking, he told us how he solved the problem. When they griped, he'd say OK, and then close up the tailgate and drive toward the end of the camp. Then he'd turn his truck around, step on the accelerator, get up to about 60 miles an hour and slam on his brakes. Now there's room for more, he'd say.

No sooner had he finished the story when we heard a gunshot coming from inside the compound. Actually, most of us weren't surprised, knowing that no matter how many times the prisoners were searched, there were always a few guns hidden very well. The truck driver asked us what that noise was and we told him it was probably a gunshot. Then we suggested that since he was a big, exceptionally strong fellow, we'd let him go in and check it out. He got wide-eyed and said, "Not me. You the combat boys, I'm just a truck driver," and with that he ran back to his truck.

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