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THE FIRST 3 DAYS OF THE BULGE-from a mortarman's view (Dec. 16-19,1944)

Intro: First draft written 55 years ago (1945) after the war was over when I was 19 years old. This draft was recently found in a collection of letters I had written to my mother.

PRELUDE

Five days before the great counterattack started we left a heavily wooded hill where we had bivouacked for three days in heavy snow after a long ride in 6 x 6's up from Le Havre. It was Dec. 11th and we were someplace in Belgium near the German border. That area, though in Belgium, was actually German in spirit. The people spoke German and we learned later that some were very much in sympathy with the German army even though they didn't show it outwardly. The weather was very bad all the while we were there - no visibility from the air - so we were able to build large enough fires, without risk of observation, to get some of our clothes and blankets dried out. We cleaned our weapons every day and were all very serious when it came to thinking about using them very soon. None of us were too scared right then because we didn't know what we were getting into. The mortars had gotten caked with dirt and snow and a little rust lying in the jeep coming up from Le Havre. We got them all cleaned up and ready to go.

After about three days there we broke camp one morning before dawn and moved forward in open trucks up to our reserve positions where we stayed a short four days before the real battle started. It was a fairly long ride - through St. Vith and two or three smaller villages. Along the way we passed units of the 2nd Division pulling out and wondered how long it would be before we would be going back for a rest as they were doing. Lt. Winslow, our platoon leader, had been on the quartering party that had gone ahead to arrange our quarters so the weapons platoon was well taken care of as far as getting a good place to sleep and live was concerned.

We came down a long hill into the little village of Himmeress right on the Belgian - German frontier and unloaded in broad daylight. Actually, we had been under enemy observation coming into town but there was no apparent effort made to get in without being seen. Thus we still didn't realize how close we were to the line and felt fairly safe. The 1st and 2nd mortar squads were together in one room of a farm-house. It was a strange situation. Here we were closer to the line than we had ever been - yet for the first time since leaving Banbury, England, we had a roof over our heads. The family in the house was very friendly, yet we had been instructed to trust no civilians and to go nowhere alone or without our sidearms.

At times that proved somewhat embarrassing but we followed orders. One other room in the house was available to us - the dining room. There was a large heavy table, chairs and benches in there - a good place to write or just sit around at night and talk. The cook stove was in there and that was the only place the family had to eat so we tried not to intrude when they were eating. You can imagine that a fellow wouldn't feel just right walking in on them as they were seated around the table, take off your pistol belt, lay it beside you and sit down. They went out of their way to be cordial and seemed anxious to make friends with us.

I remember very well one of the last nights we were there. The man of the house had come in evenings before and we would practice our German on him. He was about 40 (seemed old to us), not very large and was taking care of the place. He would come in and stir up the fire in our small stove - bring us apples or waffles or hot chocolate (made with real milk) - and usually stay awhile to talk. This particular night, Pat - our section runner- was playing his harmonica and got off on Christmas carols while the old man was there. We soon coaxed him into singing along. We opened the door to the next room and there was the whole family singing with us. It was a language of song that we all understood. We were singing our praises to the same Lord. That was the closest I came to feeling a Christmas spirit that year.

We spent four days digging in positions for a secondary defense line. Our mortar was in a backyard covering a sector coming down across a dirt road to the bottom of the valley. We didn't mind the work but it did seem foolish to think there would ever be occasion to use these defenses. Everything had been so quiet along the front especially in this sector. The 2nd Division had been in that position for a long time and had built up good heavy logged in positions. Everything seemed well under control. While we worked we joked about the Jerries getting through our lines -- yes, it seemed impossible then ---.

#### BATTLE OF THE ARDENNES

Early on the morning of Dec 16th we woke up to the steady pounding of artillery up and down the line. We were used to the sounds of our own guns firing from up the hill across the river behind us. They had been firing harassing fire every day, but the noise that day was different. Soon after dawn we were told to get up and get ready to move out. Nobody knew what was happening - we just got our stuff packed ready to move. There were a few comments about the extra heavy fire but no one guessed what the situation really was. The kitchen was fixing a good breakfast - hotcakes, doughnuts and coffee - but we didn't have time to wait on the hotcakes. Some of the guys ran down and grabbed some doughnuts and a canteen cup of coffee. If I had realized that was the last hot food we would see for weeks I wouldn't have missed it.

When shells started coming in on our village and on the guns in the hills behind us we got the picture loud and clear that something was wrong. A feeling was growing in the pit of my stomach - the only thing close to compare it to was the nervousness and insecurity just before a big basketball game.

The time came to load into the trucks and Sgt. Gribbin told us in a few words what was expected of us. "They've broken through Canon Co. and "C" Co. is going up to plug the hole." What else could it be but a heavy combat patrol - happened to hit a weak spot and slipped through. Couldn't be anything more than that. This just wasn't the right kind of weather for an attack. --Yeah, that's what we were thinking - we soon learned better. It was below freezing - not what we Californians had grown up in. All the stuff that we would need was jammed into our packs - rations, gun cleaning oil, extra socks, a blanket - but just before climbing into the trucks it was seen that we couldn't do much fighting with all that stuff on our backs so we dropped our packs along with our gas masks. That left us with field jackets, wool gloves and overshoes to fight the cold - plus weapons and ammunition. Luckily I threw a C and D ration into my jacket when I dropped my pack.

But not to worry - if everything went right we would go up and meet this bunch that had broken through, push them back, regain Canon Co's old positions and set up to hold. Our packs and overcoats would soon be brought up to us in trucks. As it turned out I never

saw my pack, overcoat or any other of my equipment again. There were plenty of uniforms in those duffle bags and the Jerries weren't slow to take advantage of them. We learned later that, dressed in our uniforms, they had a merry time disrupting communications, traffic flow and supply lines.

The front line was fluid and we didn't know how far the Krauts had come already. Our trucks were open and we were ready to jump out at any time. It was a mad dash for a couple of miles up the road to Winterspelt before we were fired on and piled out. We hadn't gotten our mortar ammo yet and had to wait for our jeep to catch us. It was a scramble tearing down the clover leaves. We threw 16 rounds apiece into our ammo bags and slipped them over our shoulders. I stepped back inside a barn and tore my rounds clear out of their cases while a little boy stood nervously in the other end watching me. I was briefly overcome with sadness, sensing that the whole village - and everyone left in it - was doomed and I was unable to stop it. No sooner did we get out than artillery started tearing it up from one end to the other.

Our section was broken up and each mortar squad was attached to one of the rifle platoons. We were assigned to the 1st platoon and moved out with them as one of the attacking platoons. Three days later we joined remaining remnants of the company and found that we were the only squad to survive those first few days of hell intact. The 1st platoon quickly moved out of the town in column across open country and soon into some heavy woods where we spread into a skirmish line. The terrain was rough and the load of ammo grew heavier with every slippery step. We soon began to see what was waiting for us up ahead. We saw that a fellow can be a beat up bloody mess and still walk. These boys making their way back to the aid station were not a pretty sight. All we could do was stare at them as they passed and wonder when it would be our turn. It was a trickle going back then compared to what must have been on the road after the barrage lifted that was soon to come. Some of the men that we met were not wounded - they were dazed, disoriented, disorganized, wandering aimlessly looking for buddies. We got a blurry picture from those men of what had happened so far that morning. It had truly been a breakthrough - the line hadn't given and bent or fallen back - it had been chewed up right where it was with massive artillery fire and overwhelming infantry assault.

We still hadn't met their riflemen when their artillery caught us there in the woods as we were getting organized. It was a baptism of fire to be long remembered. They first whistled in off to one side - I had to think what to do. It soon became instinct to hit the ground with the first whistle, find the lowest depression possible and hug it close. It seemed as if they were bursting right at your side or just over your head and you lived years waiting for that hot shrapnel to tear through you. We had changed loads earlier and I was carrying the mortar instead of ammo. I leaned it up against me hoping it was some protection. You would think that nothing in all the world could pry you loose from that earth, but when the fellow in front of you moves out you've got to move too or you're alone and lost. At every little let up or pause in the bombardment we moved ahead. They had those woods boxed in as perfectly as if they knew in advance exactly where we would be going. It appeared to us that they were throwing everything they had in there at once to catch us before we could reach them - and they did succeed in getting well over half the company in those first few hours. If I ever did any honest to goodness praying, I did it lying there with my face in the slush. Time had ceased to exist and the cold was no longer your primary concern.

We were still pushing ahead to get out from under the artillery when we made contact with their infantry. They were taking chances then - practically dropping their shells on



their own men. I heard the rip of a burp gun (a very rapid fire German machine gun) for the first time and everyone instinctively scooted back to lower ground as chips flew from the trees above. One of our boys got that first gun with a rifle grenade. From then on it was almost like attack problems we had run over and over at Camp Atterbury. Lt. Mc Kay, the 1st platoon leader, must have seemed invincible to those Krauts. He didn't appear to know the meaning of fear - up ahead exposing himself to signal us forward. If we had known then what we were doing we probably never would have done it. We were bucking the point of a major offensive that was soon going to crush about 40 miles of our lines and penetrate westward about 75 miles. We were green troops pushing back a small element of Hitler's pride and joy - the 6th and 8th panzer armies.

The first casualty I saw was one of our older men (over 25). He had been shot through the foot and couldn't walk. There was only one Medic with us and he was needed on more serious cases. I cut his pick-mattox off his belt for him and we had to leave him there as he started digging in.

We were stopped again by another burp gun long enough for them to get in on us with another barrage. Lt. Mc Kay wanted mortar fire on that burp gun but our squad leader, Sgt. Spooner, who had the sight for the mortar, couldn't be found. A dirt road cutting through the trees gave us enough clearance to get some mortar rounds out. We didn't have time to set up with bipod and sight so Mac set the tube between his legs aimed in the general direction of the burp gun. I dropped about 10 rounds down the tube. I don't know if we actually hit him or just scared him off. Nevertheless the gun stopped firing. The barrage came in before we could get out of the road. I rolled into a shallow gully by the side of the road and pulled my bag of ammo over my head. Shells were coming in just off the road in the trees where I had left Miller and Krueger - I thought sure they were goners, but neither one of them was hit.

The Germans in our little sector hadn't expected to play defense and we had them on the run. We didn't stop until we had regained Canon company's old positions, about a mile from where we had first made contact. They held for a short while from those old positions. They were miniature pillboxes but our mortar, bazooka, rifle grenades and hand grenades persuaded them to leave. Bayonets on the ends of rifles put the fear of God into those who were left in the communication trenches and they made a wild dash back over the hill. At the same time, a handful of men jumped out of an emplacement and came running down the hill towards us waving their arms and yelling their heads off. It's lucky they weren't shot before they were recognized as our own men. They had been held prisoner there where they had been captured early that morning. When we came over the hill their captors had deserted them. You can imagine how happy they were to see us. We salvaged about 12 men from all of Canon company - normally a force of about 175 men.

Six of the Germans took the easy way out and came down with their hands over their heads yelling "comarade - comarade". They proved helpful to us because we found one of our guys cut up pretty bad with shrapnel who was still alive and we figured he could be carried out on a makeshift stretcher. Taking those positions cost us a B.A.R. (Browning automatic rifle) man from the 1st platoon - a kid about 19 - Seward's was his name. A burp gun tore through his shoulder and side. He lived just long enough to call for help. I remember back in Camp Miles Standish - on our way from Camp Atterbury to England - he got quite a kick out of having his head shaved except for a narrow strip down the center - a Mohawk. Little Davis - a kid from L.A. - avenged Seward's death with an M1 practically before he fell.

We set up the mortar and put down traversing fire on the other side of the hill trying to catch a few of them as they retreated back through it. I was over the crest of the hill observing and got in a few pot-shots with my carbine. From that point on it was a hard, heavy, 10 day grind back- and back - and back. We had gained our immediate objective, but it was to do us no good. We had come up alone - one rifle platoon and one mortar squad - there was no one on either of our flanks except Germans and they were bypassing us fast with motorcycles, personnel carriers and tanks. It would have been no trouble at all for them to wipe us out - but we weren't worth the delay it would have cost them.

We were separated from the rest of our company and we were too small a force (about 30 men) to hold there very long. The only sensible thing for us to do was to try to get back to our company. We went through the emplacements, picked up any ammunition we could use, and started back through the woods. It must have been early afternoon because we marched a long way before dark. We started out retracing our advance, slipping through the gap we had made coming up, but we soon learned the lines were so fluid there was no such thing as a gap and we angled off cross country into some better cover. We had fired about half our rounds, but with what we picked up from Canon Company everyone had a heavy load. There was heavy continuous artillery fire to the south of us all that afternoon as we marched back - never knowing when we would run into their lines or patrols.

That evening before dark we made contact with what was left of our 2nd Battalion. They still had one supply road open to the rear but no radio communications. We were able to put our stretcher case on a jeep (never heard if he made it or not) , turned our prisoners over to the battalion, and dug in right there where we remained isolated for the next two days and nights with no communications to the rear.

Our security was set up all around with the mortar emplaced to cover a valley down from the hill we were on. Digging was one way to keep warm - scratching in the shale with our entrenching tools and piling the dirt around the edge, making the hole look deeper to us. It soon grew dark and our shovels made so much noise we had to stop digging.

Up until then we had had no time to think about what was going on. Now we had twelve hours of darkness for our imaginations to run wild. We arranged to have one man in the squad awake all the time and got into our holes. It didn't take long after we were inactive to realize what little clothing we had. I had neither my overcoat nor my long-johns and with the sun down we got a bitter taste of the cold. I lined the hole with pine-boughs, piled them over the top of the hole as a simulated roof and pulled some in to lay right over me hoping to keep a little heat in. It helped a little - but not much.

It was another long night. The artillery fire seemed to increase - but where was it coming from? - first to the right of us - then to the left - then ahead and next behind. We hadn't yet learned to distinguish our own big guns from the German's which added greatly to the confusion. Then in the middle of the night something incomprehensible blasted over our heads. It was going over our heads at a very low altitude spitting flame from its tail. The sound was a sput - sput - sput - like an old John Deere two banger with no muffler. I wondered if this was some weird secret weapon and later learned that they were headed for Liege and Antwerp and even London. This was our first view of the later celebrated buzz-bomb - a rocket propelled 1,000 pound bomb. Up until then we had heard nothing about them. Weeks later when we were back in a rest area near Liege we learned to adjust to the routine of the sput - sput - sput overhead, where with their short

wing they were visible and subject to anti-aircraft fire. They were half-way ignored as long as the motor was running - but if it stopped it meant that the bomb was dropping and everyone below hit the ground.

I met still another terror that night - the infamous screaming meemie - a bank of rocket propelled shells fired off in a series. Off in the distance you could hear them wind up with their long series of screams growing louder and louder and then abruptly dying out. At first I didn't associate the long string of explosions that soon followed with the weird squeals. The bursts moved back and forth in front of us, moving closer and closer and closer. I began to sweat - estimating the seconds left before they would be on top of us. It was an unknown to me and sounded then as if it would surely destroy everything in its path. I found out later that it was not nearly as destructive as it sounded. The steady approach of explosions stopped before reaching us and we all relaxed. The weather had been cloudy and misty during the day but was clearing up at night and a bright moon was shining. I was able to fall asleep a couple times that night and had vivid lifelike dreams of home - a warm room, a soft bed, eating around a table, being with my mother and little dog - where there was happiness and laughter.

The next day was uneventful. We got a load of ammunition from the 2nd battalion and two rations apiece. Along with the supplies came word from the jeep driver that "C" company only had about 50 men left (after starting with over 150). We moved the mortar over to cover an approach through some woods and dug it in again. Pfc. Irwin set up a burp gun all ready to fire right beside us. The day before he had knocked the crew out with a rifle grenade and turned the gun on its crew as they tried to get away. He then lugged the gun along with him, as well as a couple boxes of ammo. It was wasted effort as he never got to use it.

The third night became a nightmare even worse than the first two. We had moved the mortar to two other positions and had dug in during the day. We tore down the clover leaves of ammo that had been delivered, taking the shells out of their cases and loaded up our ammo bags with all we could get in them - 18 rounds apiece. That night we had to take a few out of each bag and leave them behind because they were just too heavy to carry. "I" Company was the largest unit with us there. We didn't have a real line - just scattered strongpoints - with no security on our flanks. Late that evening the Jerries began to move - not through us but around our flanks. The next morning they would have come in from all sides had we still been there. Just after dark I company pulled out, withdrawing down a road that ran along behind us. By prearranged whistle we had quietly tore the mortar down, crawled out of our holes and loaded up all of our equipment and ammo - all without a word or sound. We couldn't let them know we were strung out on that road. As "I" Company passed we waited just off the road, wondering where the Jerries were, and finally swung in on the end of the column.

The moon was almost full and we thanked God for that little bit of light. The open fields were under about six inches of snow - the roads were rutted trenches of mud. In broad daylight with no load on your back it would have been tough country to march over. We stumbled along in the dark doing our best to stay on our feet. Each time we fell it became harder to get back up with our loads; yet I never thought of dropping the mortar - which would have lightened our load. by 42 pounds.

I saw that the innocent could not escape the savagery of war. In our path lay the most beautiful and largest buck deer that I had ever seen. He had just recently been caught by shrapnel and he lay there with his head thrown back to the moon - eyes wide open - red snow all around him. Looking back I can't see how it was possible for us to plod



on and on through the night. I would think a body has a limited amount of strength - and when that's gone where does the energy necessary to keep going come from?? It would have been so easy to give up - to lie down and quit - but our year of training had been for a purpose. Our mind had been conditioned to do the impossible -- and so we kept going, not letting the body in front of us get out of sight.

At some point along the march we separated from the 2nd Battalion units we were with and Lt. McKay was leading his platoon and our mortar squad back to what he thought would be the 1st Battalion sector. The road led down through gently rolling hills and across a long sidehill sloping up to our left. A single shot cracked from the top of the hill to our left and simultaneously we all hit the mud to our left up against a low bank that was left when the road was cut. Immediately after that first shot a machine gun opened up with long bursts sweeping the road. We hugged the mud for a timeless period not making a sound. My only thought was that we had walked into a perfect ambush. Slowly it came to us that that had not been the familiar rip of a Jerry burp gun but rather the slower staccato of our own light machine gun. Mac yelled out the password and was answered with another short burst of fire. He yelled again and again - the password - the counter sign - our organization - and the worst cussing had ever heard from him. None of it brought any recognition from the top of the hill.

The courage that later cost Mac his life showed itself here. He yelled that he was going to go up that hill and started up - really not knowing whether it was Yanks or Krauts manning that gun. As it turned out we had run into "B" Company positions. They had been ordered to fire without challenging because the word had already spread that Germans had infiltrated the lines in American uniforms. We were glad that machine gunner needed more practice - he didn't touch any of us. It must have been about midnight and we welcomed the sight of more of our own men even though there was only a handful of "B" Company left. Our combined strength didn't make two good platoons. We started to dig in and strengthen the position but soon got word that we were all moving out again.

Thick black clouds had darkened the moon. I kept looking for the dim glow of dawn - but the night dragged on and on. The edges of the road were peacefully white with clean fresh snow but a parade of trucks and tanks and self propelled guns had all left the road a deep rutted mess of mud and slush. I had long since used up the canteen of water I started with three days earlier and stepped off the road far enough to scoop up some clean snow to quench my thirst. Even though it was freezing weather we were sweating under our loads of ammo and weapons. Luckily I kept my overshoes on. Some of the guys couldn't stand the weight of the mud that would accumulate on the bulky shoes and discarded them. This frequently resulted in frozen or frostbitten feet. With the cold and the fatigue our thinking was getting fuzzy. Where were we? Where were we going? How much longer would we have to walk? Would we ever get back to our company? Was there anything left of our company? Would daylight ever come?

But we did keep moving and as we crested a hill there was suddenly a glimmer of light in the distance and as we moved on it grew brighter. Over a slight rise and then down a long hill we could make out a cabin and barn at the bottom with lights blazing from the windows. It was the only patch of light we had seen all night. We got close enough to see that it was a drunken party - a bunch of Germans enjoying the spoils of war. We should have been worried that they had moved past us so fast - but our only concern then was to avoid them. We swept wide off the road around the celebration and continued cross-country. Clouds were moving fast across the sky and with them came

sleet and snow. I was thankful for the occasional burst of moonlight that allowed a glimpse of where my next step would be. But I was also thankful for the darkness and its protection. We could have blundered through the middle of a Kraut encampment and never been seen. Most of all I dreaded the thought of rain. My ammo bag hanging over my shoulders would keep the worst off and my field jacket was water repellent, but if my clothes ever soaked through it would seem useless to fight the cold. We were fortunate that the clouds brought little rain.

Sometime close to morning our march came to an end. The last 500 yards were almost straight down. It was like trying to ease your way down a steep roof covered with snow. Small shrubs and weeds sticking up through the snow were our only checks against going all the way to the bottom in one big slide. A strip of woods near the bottom was our stopping place for that night. I propped the mortar against a tree along with my carbine, sight and ammo. There were no questions asked. gathered a few fine bows to lay on and took the ammo out of the bag so I could lay, little bit of canvas over me. I braced my feet against a tree to keep from sliding into a swirl of fantastic dreams.

The morning of the 19th of December found me pulling out my last hoarded bit of rations. I sorted through the junk in my pockets and found a couple lumps of sugar and a couple pieces of hard candy that I had saved from a C ration the day before. We loaded up and moved off across the hill again still wondering where we were going and secretly hoping that we might go way back to reorganize - but that was not to be.

#### POSTSCRIPT

This ended my detailed notes so the remainder of the story that can be recalled after 55 years is vague and fragmented. By Christmas day we had rejoined what was left of the 424th - which had become the 424th Regimental Combat Team. A chaplain held Christmas services on the side of a hill. From then on we started moving east in a series of attacks and I became a squad leader. We passed north of St. Vith and by mid-January were back on the German frontier in the Siegfried line. From there we were pulled back to a rest area and then clear back to Rennes, France where the 106th Division was reorganized. We returned to Germany into a reserve position and the war ended before we saw any more action.

This experience had a profound influence on my remaining life. After leaving the army in 1945 as a Sergeant, I was determined to never spend another day as an enlisted man so I signed up for ROTC at Pomona College and upon graduation joined a Civil Affairs Reserve unit. This led to a most interesting series of assignments for the next 30 years ending as Asst. Chief of Staff for Civil-Military Operations as a Colonel. Another major impact that those war years had on my future was being eligible for the GI Bill which made six year of college possible and enabled me to enter the teaching profession. After 35 years with a variety of teaching and administrative positions, including the Superintendency of a Unified School District, I was able to retire still in good health with only fungus toes as the aftermath of trench foot to remind me of the dark days of December, 1944 And as is true with so much of life, the dark days do pass and we benefit from our experience.

Source: Self



Page last revised

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