

S/SGT RICHARD A. THOMAS

422nd Regiment/H
106th Infantry Division

S/SGT RICHARD A. THOMAS FOR DISTINGUISHED SERVICE

Richard A. Thomas, 930 Bay St. San Francisco, Calif., is among the charmed circle of living American infantrymen to wear the Distinguished Service Cross for valor above and beyond the call of duty. We do not have a copy of the citation accompanying this award, so we bring you the story as told by 2d Lt. Lewis R. Walker, as an excerpt from the full story of Co H. 422d Inf, which will appear in the June 1948 issue of the CUB. It is nightfall, on 19 Dec. '44. Remnants of the 422d are gathered in a 1,000 yard oval, defending on all sides against the steel ring thrown around the regiment after the Schonberg attack. Continuing, in the words of Lt. Walker:

Complete darkness fell. My sergeants came to the log shelter which served as CP for Company H. It was here that I learned of the heroism of S/Sgt Richard A. Thomas, company motor sergeant.

Walker goes on to tell of four separate acts of valor performed by Thomas. Details are lacking from this narrative, but those who served in the Ardennes can visualize what each of the following direct dose-packed sentences means.

He had led a patrol through enemy territory, and brought back a trailer and truck of food to the encircled regiment. He saved the remnants of the 81st Engineer Company at Auw. He scouted out cross-country routes to St. Vith, through enemy terrain. He attempted to recapture an American officer-prisoner from a strong force of Germans. For those and later deeds, attested to by eye-witness affidavits, he has been awarded the DSC.

For participation in these, actions, Silver Star Medals were awarded to T/5 Ernest C. Gerry, Co F, of Lovell Maine; Sgt Herman W. Pace, Co H, 58 Jefferson St., Schuyler, W. Va.; Cpl Clyde McDaniel, Co H, of North Carolina; Sgt Roy J. Jensen, Co H, 300 S. Sprague St., Ellensburg, Wisc.; and Cpl Lawrence J. Doerr, Iox 308, Oreville, Wash. If I can learn the full name and ASN of Pfc Potter of H Co., he too will be a Silver Star wearer.

"Later that night I saw a first hand example of Sgt Thomas's leadership. While in the log shelter, we heard an enemy sound truck open up from a hill across the valley. It demanded our surrender, played popular American songs, and told us how nice it would be to be playing baseball in a prison camp." Thomas left the log shelter, rounded up a few volunteers, took out a patrol, and one of his men erased the sound truck with a well thrown grenade.

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Battle Of The Bulge

First Hand Narrative by Staff Sergeant Richard Anthony Thomas 422 INF/H

All the actions that my squad and I participated in and the dangers we were faced with are as vivid in my mind as if they happened yesterday. As God is my witness and with truth paramount in my mind, I attempted to describe them as accurate as I possibly could to give the true measure and sense of the environments in which we maneuvered. However, the unequivocal proof lies in the final results we did accomplish in all our missions.

This narrative describes three missions: (1) First, my squad and I rescuing fifty men in the face of the enemy and lead them back one and a half miles to safety. (2) The second mission was the recovery of two and a half tons of food from behind enemy lines that had absolutely no chance to succeed except for several miracles; had they not happened as they did our missions would not have been successful; certainly a phenomenon so extraordinary as to be unbelievable were they not substantiated by the physical results. A (3rd) mission was a night mission in which we attempted to rescue two men in enemy territory that ended up in our discovery of a large enemy force preparing to engage our force.

In each case, without hesitation my squad confidently stepped forward armed only with their rifles, but most of all, by their undying faith in God and their belief that our cause was right and just.

Our unit was H Company (medium mortar machine gun company) of the 422nd. Regiment 106th Infantry Division.

On the evening of December 15th 1944 our Infantry Division was posted along the German Siegfried line. Immediately upon arrival my company commander's runner My first assignment began the mom when our Company Commander's runner gave me the order to report to Headquarters immediately.
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All five of our officers were present when I reported to Headquarters; Captain Jacobs immediately said "Sergeant Thomas our Division is spread out along the Siegfried so thinly for twenty seven miles that there is a mile and a half gap between each unit I want you to report to headquarter in the morning and pick up a twelve-man squad and patrol our mile and a half north to the end of the Siegfried lines at Auw, Germany, that will be all Sargent". This was a direct order for sure, a little brief perhaps, but I excepted it as a compliment and said "yes sir" and turned and left headquarters. Unfortunately, I would not ever see four of those five officers again.

Knowing that our Division was spread out for 27 miles, when the normal range for a Division should only be 5 miles; this had to be equivalent to trying to stop a river flow with a sieve with holes as large as one's head. This was definitely the time to have complete trust and confidence in our leaders.

My first priority was to critique, as much information I could glean regarding the terrain within our 1 ½ mile North from the force that we were relieving.

Fortunately, I was able to stop a Sargent that was rushing by and told him I was to lead the patrol on our one and a half miles North in the morning and asked him what was the terrain like in that area? He horridly said "you will be traversing below a steeply forested incline that you could use for an immediate means of coverage; that would be West to your left and to your right, East, there would be an open area beyond which would be within enemy territory"; then he said "good luck Sargent" and turned and rushed off to catch up to his unit.

With that information, I decided that I would begin my mission before sunup to avoid enemy detection, as much as possible, but still have enough light to detect any enemy activity ahead.

The next morning, I rose early, cold and stiff as a board. My bed had been a frozen foxhole with two blankets that I shared with my M1 rifle. My pajamas consisted of the clothes I wore many days before. At this point I tipped my canteen up, swished a few times, and swallowed. That took care of brushing my teeth, having breakfast, lunch and possibility dinner as well.

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The weather was bitter cold with scattered snow on the ground that was frozen and crunchy with every step.

When I arrived at Headquarters to begin my first mission, I met my twelve-man squad that were stomping their feet and beating themselves to death with their arms. After introducing myself I told my squad that our mission was to patrol the one and half mile area gap between our unit and that of the 81st Engineers at Auw; and then I told them all the information I had learned about the terrain, and the dangers that we were likely to confront.

We traverse north at the bottom of the steep incline for approximately one and a half miles and arrived where the steep incline broke off sharply forming a flat area at the bottom for approximately one hundred yards wide ending at an embankment approximately 50' high across from the sheer break off. This flat area and the 50' high embankment formed a cull-de-sac approximately two hundred yards to the West. (it must be noted here that due to possible PTS I cannot recall one foot of that one-and-a-half-mile traverse). However, my memory at this point, began again as I happily turned sharply West into the cull-de-sac area and away from that dangerous open enemy territory East.

Less than fifty yards within the open area we came upon a different and distinct type of barbwire that I had seen in training manual illustrations years earlier. This definitely marked off a friendly land mine zone about fifteen feet wide that extended clear across the cull-di-sac.

While observing ahead trying to figure out how we were going to circumvent this particular problem I saw a church on top of the fifty-foot embankment approximately 200 feet away; this had to be the town of Auw, Germany our final destination. I checked the time for my report; it was exactly 0530 hours; at that precise moment, the town of Auw, was struck with a pernicious bombardment by what turned out to be three German tanks. Their first heavy barrage of 88-millimeter explosive missiles struck the church several times blowing its steeple completely off as several other missals struck the church below.

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At the same moment, there was the heavy mortar and artillery bombardment from the area we had just traversed a few moments earlier; the earth vibrated beneath our feet with every resounding deafening blast. Surely the enemy had seen our patrol as we arrived at the entrance of the cul-de-sac but held their fire least, they upset their striking timetable; fortunately, we turned into the cul-de-sac and avoided that confrontation. There was still another similar simultaneous bombardment that we could faintly hear further west beyond Auw; surely a two-point pincer entrapment maneuver with both spear heads moving directly South towards St. Vith, Belgium. This for sure engulfed our patrol and all our troops in-between the two pincer movements.

This day of December 16, 1944 at 05:30 established the very beginning of the "Battle of The Bulge" that accounted for the heaviest single battle loss in all American wars fought prior to this time.

Immediately following the church bombardment, approximately 50 or more of our soldiers (88th. Engineers) rushed out of the church and down the steep 50-foot embankment. After one or two minutes, more of the heavy shelling on Auw one Tiger Tank rushed up Auw's main street and in our full view stopped in front of the church and fired still another explosive missile into the church followed with several 50 caliber machine gun bursts. The tank then turned to the next building and methodically repeated the same procedure.

At this point we heard two other tanks lower down that street seemingly working their way up towards the first tank using the same procedure. It became clear, their stratagem was to coordinate their attack by having the first tank block off all of our soldiers at the top and methodically raze the homes as the three tanks moved together. While this merciless devastating attack on Auw was taking place the deafening nearby enemy artillery continued to bombard down the area we had traversed moments earlier. The soldiers that had ran down the incline immediately began waving a white tee shirt attached to the end of a large tree limb in a gesture of surrender to the tank that

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was in their view less than fifty yards above (because of the tank crews limited downward view the soldiers below were not, at that point, visible to them.

The wounded men were completely distraught and screaming things barely intelligible to us, except the one word "comrade" that were frantically repeated over and over again. This was the result of having several devastating explosive missiles burst inside the church causing tremendous shock waves that was horrifyingly traumatizing to their brains and all their senses and now they could also hear the tanks above causing mayhem in a killing frenzy throughout their company.

For a tank to take prisoners would put the tank in an extremely vulnerable position as a stationary target; it would not be beyond the realm of possibility for the enemy to cause a panic and massacre all those that tried to surrender as prisoners are definitely a liability to the enemy whereas dead bodies are an asset.

(This did occur a day later near Malmedy, Belgium when an enemy tank did massacre some 72 of our soldiers that were similarly attempting to surrender.)

Mercy sure was not being shown above us in Auw and if those tanks were to return, they

certainly would not show empathy here either. For us to stand by and do absolutely nothing to prevent such a possible catastrophe would be unconscionable.

Our patrol mission was finished here and now I had the responsibility of getting my squad back to our company that, for certain, were being pounded unmercifully at that very moment and if I did not make a concerted effort to do so I could be charged with desertion, the most egregious crime in times of war.

Right now, I had to make an instantaneous decision that would potentially risk our lives, but perhaps we could save the lives of those soldiers that were in eminent danger; in order to do this, we would have to act immediately. With no time for explanations I turned to my squad and said, "I'm going to take the point and cross this mine field area and I want you men to follow in my very footsteps!". My squad had no alternative but to follow; for them not to do so, in face of the enemy, would be the second most serious egregious offense and subjected to the same severe immediate disciplinary action as that of desertion.

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The route I chose was straight across the marked mine field area where the shortfrozen grass was the thickest and unbroken. As I cautiously crossed the area, I kept looking back and watched my squad as they stayed on my path; it was then that I remembered that I had not selected a second in command. However, it would be better for them to select one of their own.

The discretion to take on a mission of this magnitude can probably be attributed to American training and inherited sense of freedom and to react accordingly. It is this, predominantly instilled freedom, that allows the American soldier to use their initiative and ingenuity to confront any situations that is constantly in flux, as opposed to the dogmatic, stay a particular course, to achieve an objective. With these concepts and premise instilled in my mind I felt it was my prerogative to take the initiative and forestall our return to our company and immediately interact with this particular situation.

After crossing the mine field area safely, we started to approach the stranded engineers while the enemy tank above the embankment was visible to us and at our distance of nearly 150 yards we were definitely in their view as well. At one point the tank did turn directly in our direction and hesitated a moment (possibly they could not discern by their limited vision if we were part of their force or not) they then finally continue to turn and raze the buildings across the street in the same manner that they had perpetrated upon the church.

The enemy, no doubt, had seen our patrol as we approached and entered the culde-sac a few minutes prior to their 0530-hour attack but held their fire least that would upset their punctual attack timetable. Had we started our patrol just ten minutes later we would have been caught up in that first devastating enemy barrage.

When we did reach the Engineers, I was totally concentrating on the wounded men and assessing all the possibilities; many of the men were visibly wounded physically and certainly all were physiologically devastated and distraught to the near breaking point.

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Imagine one explosive bursting in the same room you were in; now add four or five more.

We were fortunate that their eyes were still in their sockets and their brains weren't scrambled. Under these tenuous circumstances sympathetic understanding and delicate control was certainly necessary.

While still being cogent of the stranded soldier's condition we did convince them that we could get them back to our lines safely but we would have to start immediately because those tanks could possibly return after completing their destruction above.

At this point I did not have a plan but I knew we had to get these men into the forested area quickly.

The engineers agreed enthusiastically and when we were sure the tank was out of sight, we made it to the safer forested area near the marked mine field where we had the time to quickly arrange for two of my squad to bring up the rear and the rest to assist the main body while I reconnoitered up at the edge where the forested incline broke off sharply above the cul-de-sac.

At this point we were moving up and away from the enemy spear head that was advancing toward our company by the same route we had used to arrive here. When I finally reach the top of the incline, I found that the terrain was manually cleared for 25 yards below the top of the slope as a fire break; this cleared space continued above the forest and below the top of the slope for about two miles straight south. This clearing was perfect in that it put the steep forested area between our group and the enemy that were also advancing south below; also, by staying below the top of the crest we would be out of view from the enemy spear head in the West that was also moving south toward St. Vith.

When my squad finally reached the clearing with our charges in tow we slowly and tediously traversed south staying below the hill crest even though traveling at the top would have been much easier with less brush and debris.

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After traversing for approximately one-half mile below the hill crest, my squad in the rear relayed a message forward for my advance group to hold up in order for the more severely wounded group to catch up.

Just as we all gathered together again, we heard tanks approaching rapidly from the west and then hesitated for a moment at the bottom of the slope opposite the side we were on; at that point one of the tanks raced straight up the slope directly toward our position and stopped just below our common crest and made a one hundred and eighty degree turn; also we could hear the other two tanks spread out below.

It was reasonable to suspect that these tanks might be the same tanks that demolished the town of Auw. The decision for us to traverse the much more difficult route below the crest of the incline was a prudent choice.

Because of the 88th. Engineers' horrifying experience in Auw, our charges were now understandably near panic again and all of them, almost simultaneously, started fumbling with their rifle clips and throwing away their black armor piercing rifle shells, claiming that they would be treated severely if they were discovered in their clips. These men's nerves were completely shot and needed treatment as soon as possible.

My control was nebulous here and to force or demand that these troubled men not

surrender would certainly make them feel that I was assuming too much authority and control over them; they also had weapons to enforce their will. Therefore, as a consequence, rather than provoke their obsession to surrender I tried to persuade them by being calm and confident that we were not as vulnerable as it seemed.

My confidence that these tanks could not easily attack us here stemmed from my training in track vehicles training school in Aberdeen, Maryland and also, applied physics at the University of Tennessee, as an aviation cadet that included extensive physics classes that covered energy and the dynamics concerning the center of gravity etc.

These huge tanks were extremely heavily armored with tons of metal forward, a perfect example of their disadvantage in striking us here; for in order for the tank crew to lower their guns on us they would have to break over the top from their incline to our much steeper decline position. That tremendously heavy multi-ton frontal armor weight
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would suddenly drop down causing a multiple drastic center of gravity changes that would force the front of the tank down sharply; this would in turn raise the tank's rear high and then that too would crash down. Both centrifugal forces would propel the tank forward and bounce completely out of control down the loose gravelly slope and end up uselessly in the trees below.

Our position was precarious as our charges were still so distraught that it would be best to keep them moving away from this situation. We did this by dropping down even further staying closer to the edge of the trees in order to take cover quickly if we needed to; this seemed to ease our charges, concerns, and anxieties considerably.

When we were about a mile and a half from Auw I quickly glance over the slope and saw that the enemy's west main pincer bombardment attack, was even further South than we were; feeling a sense of urgency I then led the group sharply east into the trees, hoping that the enemy's east spearhead had not penetrated this far South.

After a short distance through the trees, we broke into a clearing where we saw a number of our own forces nearly 400 yards below. We had moved only a short distance toward them when we saw leaves being kicked up 10 to 15 yards in front of us. We realized that we were receiving friendly fire from below; with a considerable amount of yelling and waving, the firing ceased and we gradually made our way down the slope with the wounded in tow.

When we did reach the bottom, we found it to be an artillery unit; a Major in charge approached me and asked if I was the soldier that led these men there. And before I could answer several grateful soldiers said, "Yes Sir, he sure did!" The major then said "you wait right here sergeant, I have an important dispatch to send and I will be right back". With that, he jumped into his jeep and he and his driver took off.

I knew that the Major intended to write my squad and me up for citations however, considering the battle being waged in the west moving so rapidly south I didn't want to be cut off from our Company so I had to ignore the Major's direct order.

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When I turned to my squad and told them that we were going to move out, they were visibly shocked that I would disobey the Major's direct orders. We wished our former

charges good luck and we walked away in search for our company.

At that very moment I lost my memory again (P.T.S.) until we finally located our company where we were utterly shocked, beyond belief, to discover that nearly half our company were either killed, captured or wounded leaving only one officer, Second Lieutenant Louis Walker, as Company Commander of the 96 remaining men that were still visibly shocked making it was extremely difficult to find out what happened. Words cannot describe the horror, the very nostalgia we felt losing our buddies, a relationship beyond all others to the very point of the unspoken words "I will step in front of the bullet meant for you". Their sacrifices were for freedom, liberty for America, yes for you and for us. We, each, in our only way, prayed for our lost friends, comrades, our buddies. So, for us that may survive this horrible war, these sacrifices are the hurtful, persistent hidden indelible scares within that we will, in silence, forever endure.

This was a very sad and depressing day for us all. Although deeply saddened to learn of our extremely heavy company losses we were pleased to learn of the many brave deeds that our fallen comrades had performed this day. It is our great honor to have known such noble men; they shall remain in our hearts and souls forever.

It was less than one hour after our arrival that we were completely surrounded. Had my squad and I been delayed at the artillery placement, we would not have, by circumstances, been able to have joined our company at all.

Our company was, at this point also comingled with a mixture of over one hundred other soldiers from other stranded units.

We were now in the Adrian Forest Area and on the extreme east border of the Schnee Eiffel Forest, adjacent to Nadler Laudesfeld single lane dirt road that ran east up a steep slope, that was adjacent to our area, and properly ran further directly into Germany. The slope was clear except for three hedgerows that ran laterally across the slope
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that were 5 yards wide and over 200 yards long with each separated by 100 yards of open space between each row.

Our situation was dire now that our group was completely blockaded from our main force some 15 miles away. We were virtually without supplies including food or weapons to combat enemy's tanks that we could hear in the background. Our only hope now was for the heavy overcast, which had been plaguing us for days, would lift permitting our air force the visibility to attack the enemy's heavy Panzer Tank Groups.

The day following our arrival, two German tanks and sound truck arrived on the down slope of the Nadler Laudesfeld road and blatantly displayed their arrogance and warned us of their presence. We did not have antitank weapons so we were unable to respond. The sound truck proceeded to inform us that they were in charge of that area and that we were not to enter; after which the two tanks retreated back up the east road leaving the sound truck that I was told, was demolished with a hand grenade.

Lieutenant Walker sought me out and stated that he would have given me an officer's field commission but because our records were lost, he was unable to do so now. This could have been a continuance to my being recommended for officer's candidate training

by him and other officers in our company just prior to our records being closed and our being shipped overseas.

I expressed my appreciation for the comment and assured him that I would help wherever I could. In reality, I was well qualified as a motor sergeant but I was not sufficiently trained to lead a technical mortar platoon so I was a bit relieved that I didn't have that responsibility.

The day following my conversation with Lieutenant Walker, an opportunity to help came when Spec. 5 Earnest Gerry approached me and said that our unit was almost completely out of food and that he and eleven other soldiers had volunteered to become 'Rangers' and added that one of his Rangers knew where there was a cache of food. However, he only knew it was in some buildings Northeast of our position; that was well in enemy territory where the enemy tanks had retreated the day before. He also said he was told at headquarters that there were several vehicles available there that could be used to bring the food back.

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Spec. 5 Gerry stated that he contacted all officers and noncoms in the whole group and asked them if they would lead them but all had declined. And now he asked me if I would.

The concept of such a formable venture was perhaps beyond the realm of possibility and the dangers grew exponentially greater with every second that passed and every step we would have to take deeper into enemy territory. But to do absolutely nothing as compared to trying to do something substantial was not an option for these extraordinary brave men that called themselves Rangers; the name so synonymous with, bravery and valor.

With the determination of true Rangers Tec. Gerry, courageously took on the tough job and responsibility of organizing these Rangers for this dangerous mission and now he needed a leader. He was fundamentally correct in doing this in that a squad without one single leader would be a reckless squad of twelve leaders with little or no reasonable instantaneous coordination needed to function efficiently.

Spec 5. Gerry and his men knew if they could retrieve this cache of food our unit could possibly hold out long enough for the weather to clear enough to enable our air force the visibility we needed for support.

That these men were determined to do this made them exceptional and extraordinarily brave men. I believed that if I did not lead them, they would, without any doubt, in my mind, would attempt to take on the mission by themselves.

Our company commander undoubtedly, anguished over our terrible loss of lives earlier, preferred that this, extremely dangerous mission, be categorized as volunteer. This gave us the privileged advantage of calling off the mission at any time the objective were deemed to be unattainable.

I wanted to meet these men of such strong convictions so I said, "Let's go see what you have"

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After Spec. 5 Gerry gathered up his Rangers, I saw America's greatest, their shoulders were back and their chins up and their eyes were steady on me as if they were not quite sure.

We all had our hands thrust deep in our light weight field jackets pockets to keep warm; our stiff damp leather boots were poorly insulated from the freezing cold so we were constantly stomping our feet on the snow laden ground.

After I was introduced to the men I said, "I want you all to know that I understand that I wasn't your very first choice and that is ok, but above all else though, it is imperative that I have your full unadulterated trust and confidence; and as we move along, I intend to earn them both". I said further "the one thing that amazes me most, though, is that all you men are willing to put your very lives on the line for something of such significantly danger, know that this mission will have less than a ten percent chance of succeeding and nearly zero chances that it will do any good at all if this heavy overcast doesn't lift".

"As I understand it, the cache of food is supposed to be located North; in that case that would be North of this Laudesfeld road to our right that runs East; because of the steep terrain it is the only possible road that we can use to return here. Therefore, our first step is to find the road that runs north off of this Laudesfeld road that will lead us to the building we are looking for".

"The terrain, up the slope is clear, except for three hedgerows, which will give us partial coverage as we penetrate forward for at least a short distance into enemy territory. The enemy force that is blockading us is only a couple hundred yards in the forest grove below the hedge-rows; so, we will have to assume that they will have snipers in the hedge rows; I would expect them to be in the first row. I will take the point; if we are going to do this we will have to start right now".

We cautiously made our way through the three hedgerows and just as we emerged from the last hedgerow, we saw a man trying to retrieve an errant cow that, no doubt, was extremely important for him and his family's survival. He saw us and took off running with huge strides in the clear space beyond the hedgerows; one of my men yelled, "shall we take him Sarg?" and even before he got the last word out, I yelled

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back an emphatic, "No". This assured me that these men were alert and this was either a spontaneous and instantaneous reaction or possibly their first test of me. They knew very well that we don't shoot civilians. Any shooting at all would have jeopardize our whole mission as well.

After this incident, we continued up the slope and just before we reached the top, we saw several two-story buildings, probably one-half mile beyond the end of the hedgerows (We learned later that it was indeed the little town of Laudesfeld, Germany). At this point it was too far for us to see if the buildings were occupied by the enemy reserves or the two tanks that appeared the evening before.

The man that knew where the cache of food was located stepped forward and said that those were indeed the buildings where the food was stored.

As we moved up the steep slope a little further, we saw a small section of road on our

right running north toward us and disappeared behind a small rise; this, no doubt, would be the road we were looking for. Now, leaving nothing to chance, I had to confirm that this road was clear and useable and at the same time reconnoiter for the enemy position as well.

After directing the men to stay below the crest I crawled to the top and found that there was a deep sheer canyon 200-foot-deep and 250-foot-wide that ran north to the very edge of the buildings and extended south completely out of sight. A perfect defense barrier; the enemy presence only needed to be at the buildings end.

The section of road we saw leading towards us cut into the top edge of the deep canyon leading to the buildings; it had a shale rock surface varying between 14 to 16 feet wide with a 3-foot bank on the side opposite that of the canyon but absolutely no bank on the jagged 200-foot canyon side. The road was perfectly flat and smooth as if it had never been used. Did that mean that this road was not safe for vehicular use?

As I stood up on the 3-foot bank to observe the road closer to the building I heard a faint, hardly negligible, swoosh sound that came from low on my right side. Then there was an instantaneous nothingness; my next point of consciousness came when I found myself face down about 10 feet down the slope, I had just crawled up moments earlier.

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I must have been semi-conscious when I hit the ground as I did not feel the impact. Except for the eerie feeling of being disoriented and confused I was perfectly alright. Finally, with a concerted effort, I was able to focus on what might have occurred so miraculously as to put me lying there when I was standing upright above. Now, in my semiconscious mental state, I faintly remembered hearing that vague swoosh sound and concluded that it had to have been a faulty misfired missile that displacing air before it struck the 3-foot road embankment below my feet; the impact forced me upward so suddenly I momentarily lost consciousness.

The enemy just gave us a priceless gift; had they not fired that faulty missile we would have assumed that there were no enemies protecting the road and we would have most certainly used it to our certain demise.

Still in a slight state of confusion, I started to uncoordinatedly scramble back up the slope on my hands and knees again. and for every six inches that I moved forward I slipped back a couple of inches on the loose gravel. I became irritated and frustrated with my slow progress and apparent weakness from the sudden rush of adrenalin. At that point, I realized I didn't have my best friend, my rifle, and felt strangely naked and vulnerable without it but I had to observe as to what had occurred above immediately.

Just two feet from the top, I slipped and fell to my stomach. It was at this point, that I thought that perhaps my stomach could possibly be directly over the misfired unexploded projectile that might still explode. I had to make an instant decision. I would rather have it take me where I was, rather than lose both of my legs if I crawled up further. After hesitating several moments and nothing happened, I gathered myself together again and with bated breath and a concerted effort I crawling to the top. When I looked over the 3-foot road bank I saw a weird but beautiful eddy of light blue and sea green colored smoke; they were weirdly appearing in little ball like puffs a few inches above the center of the projectile's center.

This fascinating hypnotic phenomenon was so faint as to be almost subliminal and surreal

as an apparition. The beautiful sight would disappear, then reconstitute itself again as the gasses mixed with its perfect combination of oxygen and then burst into a
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pristine rainbow of colors and then completely disappear; for the moment I was mesmerized by the brilliant array of colors emanating from above the crater's center. Accompanying all this activity there was the sharp stringent nasal and pungent throat sting and acrid stench of dynamite exuding from the crater's center; notwithstanding the taste of fear and apprehension that the missile might still explode was real and profound; then too, the enemy might see my head and shoulders above the crater and fire another missile; I had to continue to investigate as to where that missile was fired from in order to eliminate the source before we could possibly even think of using this road.

The projectile's crater was eighteen inches deep with a circumference of three foot ending at the top of the road bank where I had been standing. Had the missile exploded, as intended, I would have been part of that circumference and my squad would have had a difficult time finding all the pieces of my dog tags.

I felt really fortunate for the extremely narrow escape and thanked God for His miracle and His Blessings. This faulty missile could have been arranged through the good work of a forced labor saboteur of the enemy and should be acknowledged and thanked for the dangerous contribution. The splash of earth caused by the misfired missile was greater to my left towards the buildings. This told me that the missile was fired from across the canyon further up to my right side. When I looked up in that direction I could faintly see something, barely negligible, several hundred yards across the canyon; I surmised that to be the underside of anti-aircraft camouflage netting; that would have to be directly across the canyon from where the Lindenfeld road met the deep canyon from our bivouac area; and now, by the tank's turret turning 90 degrees the enemies' large 88mm. (3.464" inches diameter) rifle was pointed in my direction straight down the road leading to the buildings; certainly, a perfect offensive and ideal defensive position. This was no doubt one of those two tanks that had so blatantly appeared the day before with a sound truck that warned us not to enter this area. The unknown location of the second tank also added another serious dimension to our concerns; it too could
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possibly be with the tank that fired the missile or it could be at the building area with possibly the enemy reserves as well.

Considering the enemy's invincible defensive and offensive position there wasn't any way we could possibly use this road without eliminating that tank crew; even if it were, in the remotest sense, even possible it would take an inordinate amount of time that we did not have. Would this volunteer mission now seem to be considered unattainable? To continue this mission would inevitably increase the dangers exponentially greater with every minute that passed and every step that we took probing deeper and deeper within enemy territory.

Even though there was only the slightest possibility of our succeeding, there was only one way we were going to give up now and that was if the second tank and or the enemy reserves occupied the buildings or the cache of food was not there.

When I dropped back down to my squad, one of my men handed me my then clean rifle. I

could see by the look on the men's faces their concern and amazement that I was not injured especially after seeing my filthy condition.

We were now grouped together on the down slope below the road and out of sight of the tank crew above and the prevailing blockading enemy below the hedgerows. To move toward the buildings without the slightest bit of cover would be incredibly dangerous. I quickly told the squad all that I had observed above and how brilliant the enemy was to have selected their perfect defensive and offensive position that only one tank would be required to be zeroed in on the full one-mile length of the road that we had to use. Furthermore, I told them that we could still proceed to the buildings and if the enemy reserves or second tank wasn't there and the food was, we could then consider how we could possibly eliminate that tank crew while still being cognizant of the reserves and the second unaccounted for tank and crew.

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It was incredulous to even think we could possibly overcome an enemy tank with rifle butts but these men believed in miracle's and most especially when we already had one. With total commitment to our mission until we could not possibly continue further; we proceed below the crest of the hill and above the hedgerows until we reached their very end where we halted to reassess our situation; from this point to the buildings, our final destination, was a wide open area without any cover, what so ever for over one quarter of a mile; If the second tank or the enemy reserves occupied the buildings we would have to retreat back to this point as it was the only route we could possibly take to return to our unit.

From this point, we observed that there was a steep drop off of perhaps two hundred yards below the buildings where the dense forest began; that too could definitely give us an area to retreat if we encountered a superior force at the buildings.

The Rangers were blowing on their hands as they rubbed them together eager to persevere and take on the task ahead; their complete cooperation and resolve to our purpose was magnificent. Just to know and feel that they were right there the instant I needed them was reassuring.

As we tentatively moved forward towards the buildings, I dared to take moments to desperately try to think of a plan to eliminate the tank crew above if indeed the food was there. My first thought was we could remain all night at the buildings and at sunrise attack the tank crew at first light the following day. I summarily ruled that out as we did not have the weapons or the time to accomplish such a mission; each time I quickly returned my mind back to the dangers ahead; then It did occur to me that the conditions were perfect for one other possible plan that had a considerable amount of risk and only a slightly better plan than no plan at all; we were not unlikened to that of a drowning man gasping and grasping for that last little straw that may save his life. Let us call it, "The Hail Mary Plan"

With that mind set I completely concentrate on the dangers ahead and signaled the men to spread out even more.

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The enemy tank crew above probably already knew our strength but to make sure I wanted to momentarily and quickly expose ourselves and at the same time, inspect the condition of the lower section of the road that I could not see earlier from above. My plan

required the "whole" tank crew above to take notice of our larger strength. That opportunity arose a short distance ahead, and when we arrived there, I found that the road was clear and wide enough but that sharp drop off at the ragged edge of the road on the canyon side sure looked ominous. There was still that huge incredible danger that a heavy loaded truck might sluff off a significant part of the canyon edge but if we stood close to the extreme right side and drove fast enough, we should be ok. The fact that the road surface was perfectly smooth with no visible auto tracks bothered me considerably.

After being reassured of that we again began to approach the two-story buildings again; its multiple windows looked awesome and formidable; much like that of a fortress with a tremendous defensive advantage, whereas, we were completely vulnerable with absolutely no coverage. When we finally did reach the buildings, we found that neither the enemy reserves or the second tank occupied the buildings and the ranger that knew of the food cache confirmed that the food was there and intact.

Our next problem was somewhat solved when we found one of our own abandoned two-and-a-half-ton trucks; as a shop foreman in Nome, Alaska, I was quite familiar with that particular model truck. It was however, down in a huge bomb crater that involved the whole street of this small town. The truck had a long body with threefoot side rails and an immense powerful engine that drove all six wheels with deep treaded tires, it was exactly the truck we needed; My concerns were that even if we did get the front wheels over the top edge of the crater the truck might hang up in the middle and damage the driveshaft. One man in my squad, familiar with this particular model truck, took the initiative and jumped into the cab and immediately started the engine; with absolutely full throttle the powerful engine roared and with all six wheels churned; the driver continued to rock the truck back and forth, and with every effort forward, the two front wheels churned at the crater's top edge making it even sharper with every attempt.

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I purposely stood to one side to make sure the drive shaft wasn't damaged if the truck did miraculously make it over the top; I absolutely could not believe it when on the third, and I am sure it would have been our very last attempt, the driver was miraculously able to bring the front wheels over the top of the crater and onto the hard surface above. The immense engine weight over the churning front wheels was able to pull the lighter truck body over the top and amazingly the drive shaft barely touched the loose gravel. It was at this point that, with the horrendous amount of the trucks' noise, I had fearful trepidations as to the feasibility of the success of our mission; the enemy now knew we had a truck and would be ready and alert to strike if we were to attempt to pass on the very road they were zeroed in on; the very reason they were there.

After the truck was retrieved out of the bomb crater, I told the men to collect Jerry gas cans from other abandoned vehicles and fill the truck's gas tank full to the top. That was done in a couple of minutes. The reason for this was that I didn't want the slightest possibility of an explosion caused by a bullet strike above the fluid.

This would also rule out relying on a fuel gauge. After this was done the driver drove the truck up to the steps of the building where the cache of food was stored.

This is where I told my squad my "Hail Mary Plan" which was to load the truck with food and at the same time entice the enemy to attack us instead of our attacking them. This

could only be done by our perpetrating a ruse plan of pretending to throw a wild stupid drunken American liquor party.

This was the only way we could possibly succeed with the enemy zeroed in on that road. I was resolved we were not going to attack one or possible two of the enemy tanks with just rifle butts or to use the road the enemy was zeroed in on.

It would be disingenuous to even believe that the enemy would be so dysfunctional as to leave their coveted safe position; possibly an offense so egregious as to be punishable by death. Therefore, the illogical plan for them to attack us would be in the range of near zero percent but absolutely zero percent chance for us to succeed if they did not.

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These amazing Rangers did not share my hidden skepticism but immediately, with total commitment, enthusiastically put every ounce of energy they possessed loading the truck quickly. Their loud laughter was authentic and if I were told that they were kicking at the walls and braking windows from inside the building for effect, I would not have at all been surprised. Although, their immediate action bothered me significantly in that the enemy should know that liquor does not act that quickly.

Each one of these little glitches gave me even further pause to doubt the feasibility of our mission; my first thought was to try to slow them down to reality but that seemed impossible; it was indeed imperative that I constantly reevaluate our chances of success and if deemed totally impossible to succeed as it now seemed so incredulous to me at that very moment.

I dared, for just one moment, to think back again to my formally perceived immediate escape route into the forest directly below these buildings.

The squad, on the other hand, worked as if possessed and believed, no knew without a doubt, it would work. Their profound enthusiasm made me suspect that I might have missed something here. Were they not aware of all the dangers involved? My mind raced back, I could not remember, nor could I be distracted to even try and recall; it did seem as if these men were leaving all the worysome danger part up to me.

There was always that "one" omnipresent conscientious guilty feeling in placing these brave young men in such a precarious and dangerous position of trying to accomplish something so impossibly futile that may cost them their lives. But it was they who would have taken on this mission by themselves if I had not done so myself.

My job was to stand aside and stay keenly acute and completely focused on our environment and extreme vulnerability every second that we were in this enemy territory. I was especially alert for an explosive sound that would indicate the road was being made unusable for us, and an indication that the enemy was preparing to abandon their position to attack us.

The HAIL MARY PLAN had occurred to me when I recalled standing guard in Alaska and found how unbelievably far sound travels in a rare severely cold atmosphere. How
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terribly tempting it would have been just to retrieve one glass of whiskey to relieve the

bitter cold and total boredom, as well.

Here we had almost perfect conditions. The blockading enemy was now nearly the same distance from us as the tank crew above. However, the noises that they would normally be making themselves engulfed in the heavy forested area, would block out the noise we were making here. On the other hand, the tank crew above was up the sheer vegetation free canyon with its precipitous walls that would naturally channel the sounds right up to them.

Through the Rangers' dedication and enthusiasm, the truck was filled to capacity with two tons of food far faster than I thought possible. At this point the men stated that there was still more food and should they pull up a trailer that was nearby. I really needed more time to think and said, "yes ". I then sent two men to the building over- looking the area the enemy would have to cross at the end of the canyon to attack us. Now my forces were spread out a bit and I had to be cognizant of that as well.

The trailer was medium size and it too had three-foot rails enclosing a ten-foot trailer bed. Even with fewer men, the trailer was being loaded quickly with another half-ton of food. My added concern then was what effect would the extra trailer load have on the questionable shale road surface?

It was not much more than one half hour after the trailer was connected to the truck when one of the rangers said, "That's it Sarg, we got it all!". At that precise moment, before I could have possibly uttered an expletive and abandon the mission the two men that I had sent to observe the end of the canyon, for the possible enemy attack, came running up stating, "Here they come, Sarg!" They said this as if they absolutely knew it was going to happen this way all the time.

When you believe, as these young men believed, you are definitely on the right path and have God on your side.

All decisions had already been predetermined should we reached this particular point where the enemy had fulfilled the criteria where this was the only possible way that this mission could possibly have been accomplished.

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However the approaching enemy could very well be the "second" tank crew of the two tanks that did appear the evening before; too, the approaching enemy may not be the full tank crew that had fired their misfired missal at me but had left one man behind to fire their weapons that would explode us over the canyon edge in a huge fireball; or the approaching enemy could very well be the advance guard of the enemy reserves that we had been expecting; thereby leaving the whole tank crew still remaining at their lethal position.

There were huge risks ahead but there were risks when we penetrated the enemy territory, that nearly cost me my life.

The dangers here are but minuscule as compared to those that were taken on the beaches and cliffs of Normandy where hundreds of brave and courageous Rangers stormed those beaches, and did scale its precipitous cliffs while others attempted to do so and are, in fact, still there.

In essence, we are on top of those cliffs and we are not going to back down now. In such

a huge risk of possible oblivion we continued our mission.

This is where the Rangers' profound motto comes to mind, "Lead, follow or get the hell out of the way". If we failed, only God would know how hard we had tried. And for those who believe that we should not have proceeded on this devious road under these particular set of circumstance, do not know the spirit of the Rangers that I knew. In the vast magnitude of world wars, either by land sea or air, thousands of such decisions have to be made every second of every minute of every day. The good ones, are more often forgotten, but the really bad ones, that are so prevalently made in all wars, are never forgotten by those of us that have made them; they are truly the brutal invisible scars that we, who prevailed, will try to forget but unfortunately cannot and are too, in part, a casualty of war.

The driver and I jumped into the truck cab and the rest of the men piled in back and we took off immediately knowing that we would be in sight of the enemy when we passed the last building.

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The urgency would have been much less had the two Rangers I sent to overlook the end of the canyon had fired their weapons at the first sight of the enemy; that would, in fact, have forced the enemy to withdraw instead of advancing. This was, still another emphasis for an instant decision and commitment into swift action in order to compensate for that error.

Fate had brought us to this place and now everything was "totally" on the line; we had absolutely nothing more we could possibly offer. If we succeeded it would be because of Divine Providence that we so often called a Miracle.

Our barricaded unit of two hundred men depended completely upon our success here and the overcast skies to lift.

As we passed the end of the last buildings, the Rangers in back of the truck did see the enemy that were surprised and not prepared to react quickly to what they saw and we were soon out of range of their small armed weapons to have had an adverse effect; such is the necessity of planning ahead when swift action is required least any hesitation could have resulted in casualties or our truck could have been easily rendered out of action by one single bullet.

How incredibly fearful it is to know you and your squad could possibly have only one infinitesimal part of a second more to live if we should see that dreaded rifle flash straight ahead of us now; if such an explosive missile should strike our powerful moving truck the explosive missile combined with the highly revved up engine parts could end up in our cab in literally thousands of pieces as an instantaneous fireball; all of us would then end up at the bottom of the deep canyon as a war statistics.

There was no need for me to yell at the driver to keep to the right; because he could see directly straight down that precipitous canyon from his side and he certainly didn't need any distraction from me. This truck was a lot wider than I had originally envisioned and the deep shale indentations from the canyon side into our road space were far more intrusive than I had originally thought; ironically my thoughts were, could there possibly be something else more devastating ahead that I might have misjudged?

All our lives depended upon our driver's skills. I had test driven this very model truck many times in Alaska but I could never have matched the skill that our driver was performing here. He double clutched every gear smoothly up and down with hardly one

perceptual engine revolution above that which was needed while splitting gears with a smooth transition as if they were automatic.

After the first quarter mile, I let the driver worry about the road conditions while I focused intensely straight ahead for that one deadly rattle flash; possibly enough time for me to relive my whole life within that tiny portion of a second.

We climbed steady but it seemed as though we were in slow motion; it felt like an eternity before we finally reached the turn just 250 yards directly across the canyon from the enemies' tank position; as we made the ninety degree turn straight down the last half mile toward our bivouac area I began to breathe again and thanked God once more for His Blessings.

Life is so precarious in war and it will never be more appreciated than it was at that very moment; not so much that I was safe but "they" were, and now I can live in peace with that. At the very least twelve great men were, even if only momentarily, back safely. I could not have possibly done it alone.

When we finally arrived at our area, we received an extraordinarily loud spontaneous burst of cheers and applause; this told me that they all knew about our mission but did not know that I was involved until one man in the squad, I would suspect it to be Spec. 5 Gerry, jumped off the truck and shouted loudly "if Sergeant Thomas were to attack hell I would follow him!". Such a touching remark was kind and generous and it cleared up that which I had missed at the building area earlier; it was indeed their full confidence and implicit trust that I had promised them I would earn at the very beginning of our extraordinary precarious mission that seemed, at the beginning, totally unattainable. These "Rangers" were absolutely worthy of the group they had so proudly chosen to represent and truly deserved the recognition and all the accolades they earned and were respectfully receiving now. It was their unshakable faith, bravery, and willingness to persevere to the extreme limits which seemed beyond that which human nerves could possibly endure that made this impossible mission possible. Lest we forget wars are won by just taking that, seemingly impossible, one step more forward.

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The tension of getting these brave young men back uninjured struck me to the point that it almost cost me to lose my tough stoic image that all sergeants rely upon so heavily. I turned and walk away.

I had not gone far before a soldier caught up to me and, after getting in step, said "Sarg, my officer told me to ask you if it would be safe to go back?" I replied, "No" and emphasized it even more emphatically by saying, "Hell no!". Saying nothing more that could have possibly been misconstrued to mean something else I continued to walk away.

I did not report the mission to headquarters as I felt the material evidence was quite sufficient.

A short time after this incident one member of my squad brought me a delicious paper

plate of the food that we had undoubtedly retrieved. I did not realize that I was so hungry; I must have been thriving on adrenalin.

As I was eating, I felt as though we were alone among many others and my squad member was measuring me as a man, as they all do at the very beginning to gain their explicit trust and confidence.

As I finished the food, I thanked him and as I drew my field jacket sleeve across my mouth I said, "What no napkin"? He threw up his arms and we both had a laugh that relieved some of the tension. Bringing this food was a kind and thoughtful gesture that was indicative of their approval. He took my paper plate and turned to walk away, I slapped him on the back and said, "thanks for all the good work today" and in a controlled voice, a little deeper than I intended, said "and please thank all the others men as well". He said "I sure will Sarg, I sure will". With that he lowered his head, kicked at the frozen ground and quickly walked away; possibly in resentment that providence did not place us in the same unit, I too, felt the same way. God these guys were good. Now this Ranger would join his own tested and now seasoned buddies in a relationship that, to death, transcends all others. Without a doubt, "war makes boys into men" in just one single day.

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We had met the enemy together and together we had succeeded in doing all that we could have possibly done; now we stand by to wait for further orders; our destiny is, by happenstance in the hands of others that we must also gain confidence and complete unadulterated trust with our very lives. That, and the right cause is how wars are won. It could not have been more than a few hours after our mission was completed that Spec.5 Gerry approached me once again and told me that a Lieutenant and two of his men jumped into a jeep and went right back to the buildings we had left and were met with rifle fire. One of his men, even though badly wounded, had just returned and told the story of what had happened when they arrived; stating that he didn't know for sure but he thought the Lieutenant and his other man might have been either captured or killed.

I wondered just what part of "No" did those men not understand. Sometime later I learned that the officer wanted to recover his footlocker; It would be my conjecture that the officer was not given my purposeful explicit answer to his relayed question. Spec. Gerry then told me that we had orders to try and recapture the two men and that he and the squad were ready and waiting.

This all sounded unbelievably incredulous but they have strict rules at the front and you better take them seriously; one of them is you don't ask "why" and I had to physically restrain myself from not using it here. This "try mission" sounded more like a desperate but polite request rather than a direct order which gave us more freedom and latitude to evaluate and respond in kind.

My snap judgment was that it would be best to quickly conduct a reconnaissance and possible reconnoiter at night but it certainly would help if we had more light at the very beginning. Therefore, I had to take Spec.5 Gerry's word that this "try order" came from headquarters. This was taking military informalities to the extreme, but with so little light left I had to act immediately; Spec. Gerry's credibility was certainly impecc-- able up to this point. We had to move quickly to take advantage of the little light that we had left.

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After we reached the men, I told them that this time we would proceed in a tight skirmish line, six on each side of me so we could react quickly in the dark.

We moved through the first hedgerow and proceeded towards the second when I heard a small double playful yep from what seemed to be a hungry playful puppy begging for its dinner. I hit the frozen ground hard and loud with my rifle butt as a signal for the Rangers to do the same.

That so familiar special unmistakable yep bark of a hungry playful puppy was certainly indicative that someone was out there with that dog. Could this possibly be the enemy with a dog mascot?

I was determined not to take any unnecessary chances on this particular "Try Mission", therefore I was not going to move out until I was positive it was safe to do so.

We were probably less than 60 yards below the second hedgerow that had a white snow drift, approximately 2 feet high and 8 feet long, piled up against the side of the second hedgerow trees.

We lay listening for one minute, or possibly two; because of the heavy overcast and extreme darkness I concentrated steadily upon that one bank of snow and to my surprise I saw a perfect unmistakable silhouette of a German soldier crawl quickly past the snow bank on his hands and knees and then disappear in the darkness beyond; then another, and then still another. Their helmets were the most distinguishable part of their silhouette. They, no doubt, had seen us and were getting into combat position. The enemy's huge and significant advantage was that they could lob hand grenades down the frozen incline and quickly retreat behind the second hedgerow. This would be the most logical and effective weapon the enemy could use and should have used if they knew for sure we were their enemy. Just one grenade could completely wipe us out; it was imperative that we retreat before they could coordinate and expedite their significant advantage.

When I prepared to signal the men to fall back, I noticed, for the first time, that one of my men on my right flank was still standing and intently peering forward.

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The enemy must have known that their blockading force had to be near and they may not have been quite sure if we were one of their troops or not. One word from me in English to warn the standing man would dispel all of the enemy's doubts. I did not know any words in German, except a few swear ones. Although, appropriate here, I chose to slap my tight leather shoulder strap against the stock of my rifle with my cold hands. Still there was no response from the man standing; he was definitely putting our whole squad in jeopardy; we could not pull back and leave that man standing. I continued slapping my strap as hard as I could and pinched my cold fingers several times in the process; the pain was now so bad I thought I could not continue but I had too. The man standing finally noticed and got down. I then motioned for the squad to fall back.

I was angry as hell and when we got back of the first hedgerow, I told them to "Pay attention, damn it!".

We had no sooner regrouped behind the first hedgerow when we heard the loud clatter of

pots and pans and one distinct ringing warble clatter of a large pot lid dropped or more likely deliberately thrown on the frozen ground. Possibly by some angry irate cook that was just ordered to cook a hot meal when he foolishly thought they should have stopped earlier at the buildings (where we had retrieved the cache of food earlier) area instead of in the total darkness and uneven terrain here. Again, a possible sign that the lack of discipline and moral was becoming more pervasive among the enemy forces.

The magnitude of the cooking facilities was indicative of a formable contingent equivalent to that of a rifle company. Also, in the background, there were soldiers calling to their buddies, possibly trying to get their particular group organizing in the dark.

This contingent had to be the enemy reserves we were expecting and had to have arrived at the buildings (Laudesfeld) almost simultaneously, with the tank crew' arrival to attack us. Thus, vindicating our concerns at the time and also my decision not to use the overnight attack on the enemy tank crew earlier.

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This formable enemy reserve group was heading south directly toward our bivouac area less than one half mile away. This vital information was far more important than the now totally impossible "Try Rescue Mission." Consequently, I had to abandon our mission here and return to our unit with this crucial and important information.

As we started back to our area, I realized I had forgotten the password to reenter our bivouac area. Fortunately, we were not challenged and it revealed an extremely serious flaw in our perimeter security that would have to be corrected immediately.

When I reported to our company commander, Second Lieutenant Walker, I told him about the large enemy force that had just pitched camp for the night less than a half mile away and quite apparently moving south towards our position. He accepted the message and sat stoically and did not ask any questions. I did not elaborate because I was positive he felt the gravity of the situation. I then told him that I had called off the "Try Rescue Mission". When he did not respond to that either I felt he knew about that mission and Spec. 5 Gerry was right when he reported the "Try Mission" to me. After a short uncomfortable pause, I also said, "No one ever challenged us when we reentered the perimeter at the NW sector"; with that information and the report of the enemy movement the sergeant of the guard took off running to correct that serious situation. I felt compassion for our Company Commander, the responsibility and burden he had to bare and deal with was incredibly overwhelming. Our decorum was always cordial and conducted with mutual respect of rank and grade; he probably gave me far more leeway than I really deserved.

The following morning, as I approached the motor pool area, I heard several German burp Gun blasts coming from the enemy blockading area. When I arrived there, I saw several of our men standing, watching a burp gun missile kicking up leaves a short distance away. The missiles seemed to be purposely landing about ten feet short. The shooter was on a heavily forested knoll, probably not more than 125 yards away. If he wasn't trying to hit anyone, I wondered what he was trying to do? There was something wrong with this picture that needed to be checked out.

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Due to the fact that the sniper was firing from his twelve o'clock position, I circled to his

three o'clock position and started down a steep knoll, opposite that of the shooter, bracing myself from tree to tree as I made myself down the slope. I was half way down when I began receiving some real personal burp gun blasts just a few feet below my route. I quickly dodged to my left, and then left again and ended up behind an eight-inch diameter tree. The enemy's bursts continued at the rate of 8 to 10 bullets with each burst. Unless he was using tracers, he could not see where his bullets were striking but by the way those leaves were dancing six to eight feet away, I sure as heck did. The sporadic burp gun bursts continued.

"Where did I go wrong?" I looked up, sure stupid. My trees did not have any leaves like the burp gun shooters did. Being that he was so well hidden I did not believe his visibility came this far over to his right.

I tried to think of a way to get out of this mess and there did not seem to be any; for one thing, I could not climb back up the steep slippery hill. The only way would be to go straight down quickly on the same path in which the leaves were dancing.

Too much of me was exposed on both side of the eight-inch diameter tree and this persistent shooter, seemed to have a veritable truck load of ammunition and was persistent on having me for lunch. As I was deciding which direction I was going to plunge, I saw an old black flatbed truck with a man behind a mounted machine gun on the back coming out from the enemy's blockading area. I judged it to be less than 125 yards and moving across my field of vision; it had a crude red X painted on its side. Unbelievable, and to think it was all mine.

When I hurriedly tried to get in position, I found that because I was right handed, I could not fire my rifle from the left side of the tree; so, after the next burp gun blast, I quickly swung around to the other side with my left leg rapped around the tree. The back of my left shoulder was now against the opposite side of the tree; my complete upper body was exposed facing the sniper. I held my breath and hurriedly squase off a snap shot and then quickly tried to pull myself back with my left arm that was now down near the base of the tree; I kept working my left arm higher and higher while

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holding my rifle in my right hand, my right leg was well below the tree and kept slipping on the wet frozen leaves.

Time was running out; the next burp gun blast would soon begin again; I thought for a moment I would have to let go of my rifle in order to use my right hand but that was not an option. I then thought I would have to roll down the hill in an attempt to avoid the next burp gun blast; finally, with all the strength I possessed I barely made it back behind the tree; just as I did so I received another burp gun blast that struck just below where my right leg had been.

My quick snap shot had struck the windshield of the truck that stopped and a German officer jumped out waving a white handkerchief and yelled "halten", dang, another burp gun blast, this was getting annoying, the officer again yelled "halten" even louder this time. The firing finally stopped. For me to have hit that moving windshield from the position I was in made all these happenstances scary and unbelievable?

This time I had to believe the German soldier's strict obedience to their officers so I quickly proceeded down the slope bracing myself from tree to tree.

After reaching the bottom I walked over to the officer who was already walking toward me. I believed he did this in order to keep me from clumsily taking him back to the truck and collecting his other two men who were not visible at the time.

Did I detect a little bit of ego and arrogance here as well? This officer maneuver put me in a precarious position in that I was not only out in the open but I was out of sight of our soldiers as well. I had no choice but to turn my back to the driver and machine gunner who were out of sight; I was also approximately 100 yards from the enemy's forested barricading position. I didn't think they would shoot me in the back because there was a certain amount of ethical decorum that is observed sometimes.

Someone "else" just had to be boss here and if this officer didn't keep his arms up though, unfriendly fire might be the consequence and a real distinct possibility when we would come in view of our soldiers. We suddenly switched roles when I pushed his elbow up with my rifle barrel as a gesture for him to raise his arms higher, the surprise touch broke his stride with a little stumble. With his men watching, that was a "slight"
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that might affect his prestige and it did affect his psychic just a little in fear I might do it again. This changed the whole dynamics of the situation and he was not emboldened further. When we arrived to our area, I had our men blindfold the officer they were very happy to take him up to headquarters for me.

While at our Headquarters, the German officer was irate and stated that he was a medic and that he was on his way to treat some of his and our wounded. He claimed his ambulance had been fired upon and while he was there, he also advanced some reasons why our unit should surrender, stating that there were troops ready to advance from the north. Those had to be the enemy reserves that I reported to Lt. Walker the evening before.

The German officer continued to complain bitterly about his windshield being shot out and Lt. Houdon was sent out to investigate. The discrepancy was resolved when Lt. Houdon saw the mounted machinegun mounted on the flatbed truck; he then explained to the irate officer that the Geneva Convention prohibited weapons of any kind to be carried in or on ambulances. The machine gun was removed and the embarrassed officer was permitted to go on his way.

This was just another one of those informalities where I did not report any of my missions to headquarters (mainly because I was not seeking medals). After the war our Company Commander in essence wrote in one of his informal reports "of all the things that Sergeant Thomas did, few in the company knew he did them".

After the men left with the blindfolded officer, I came to the conclusion that the burp gun incident was an over choreographed clumsy attempt to divert our attention; which was in itself, ridiculous because the black truck could not be seen from that position anyway. It did, however, pique my curiosity to investigate the ruse. Furthermore, had the officer not mounted the machine gun on the back of the truck for additional protection I would not have fired upon his improvised ambulance in the first place.

That evening we were bombarded so heavily by artillery fire that my stomach was sore for two days from the pounding I received against the frozen ground. The barrage lasted

several minutes but all the strikes were tree bursts and therefore the greatest
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danger was from falling timber and debris. The vibrating tree roots played the frozen earth like a banjo. I turned all my fingernails back just trying to dig my two-inch deepfrozen foxhole just one quarter of an inch deeper, but couldn't. The sound was deafening; the barrage was the most frightening thing that I had ever experienced. Reminiscent of the experience the 81st Engineers endured inside the church at Auw; which had to be ten times more resounding and devastating inside the building. After the barrage ceased, I checked on my men at the motor pool and found them all to be shaken up but otherwise they were ok. I was exhausted and felt that I had been shot at enough for one day. I picked up my rifle and blankets and made a small spot in the soft debris and threw my blankets down and fell asleep almost immediately.

About 4:30 the next morning I felt a hard object pressing extremely hard and hurtful against my temple. When I could not turn my head, I rolled my eyes as far to the right as I could, only to meet that of the enemy. I rolled my eyes back to where my rifle was but the German pressed a little harder as a signal, "You better not". It was the first light of a cold chilly dreary day. There comes a time when one has no other choice. The enemy then removed the barrel of his rifle from my temple. At least he did not pull the trigger and walk away, which is an expected procedure if he believed that the person is faking death and therefore a threat to him after he passes. It is so much safer and easier just to pull the trigger than to take prisoners. At this point, a prisoner is a liability and a body out of the fight and no longer a liability. The enemy had every right to do this as I had not indicated any sign of surrender.

It seems as though our company Commander, with great courage and forethought had surrendered that night, therefore saving many lives, in a hopeless situation. Why did I not know the inevitability of this the night before?

During the night, Lt. Walker released all those who wished to escape to do so. I was told by several men that my squad attempted to find me in the debris and total darkness but failed and finely took off on their own. I wished them God's speed. They were the bravest men I have ever known and I was proud to have led them.

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Under the circumstances that put us here at this time and place, of which we had no control, my squad and I tried and did, even though it was only for a short period of time, prevailed under difficult times and circumstances.

Had my squad found me that night we might have contributed even more.

A short distance after we were taken from our area, our hearts sank as we came upon the horrific scene of many of our buddies and comrades that had been missing for five days. They were by the roadside in frozen grotesque positions and covered with an even thin layer of light brown dust, making this whole scene even more starkly surreal and gruesome. The men in our group broken heartedly called out their buddies' full names and others, in reverence, followed with their affectionate buddy nicknames as we fervently prayed and unashamedly teared as we reluctantly passed this horrific scene. I knew many here but one especially well because of his outstanding vivacious personality. I was on my rescue mission at the time he was severely wounded; two of his

buddies, who loved him, volunteered to put him on a flatbed truck in an attempt to get him to an aid station. All three were here, they did not make it.

This scene is indelibly etched, as an epitaph of sorts, that will remain in my memory forever. I felt ill and deeply depressed. This horrible scene certainly depicted the horrors of war with all its despicable facets. This heinous scene was compelling proof that war was most certainly invented by the devil and this had to be a hell for these brave courageous men that died here. The blood-stained frozen grass told the terror of that moment.

Tears in all the grown men's eyes said it all as we passed; it was impossible to have seen all of them and I was thankful I did not see any of my squad there that day. God's speed you brave men, God's speed.

After being forcibly made to move on from this horrific scene we begrudgingly slowly moved on to our own tortious destiny as well.

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The Geneva Convention declares that the enemy can require a private to work therefore they were placed in stable prison camps (stalag) and were provided with a Red Cross parcel weekly with seven days of food plus cigarettes. They also had water for showers, shaving, brushing teeth, and bathroom facilities including such simple item as bath room tissue.

While we, as noncom, were forced to march, one tortious step at a time, some 400 miles or more from Belgium to the Czechoslovakian border during Germany's record cold winter with all its elements of snow, rain, hail and bitter cold wind. For food, we had less than one small slice of bread a day for four months. To add even more to our misery, we did not bathe, change or even remove clothes, brush teeth, shave or comb our hair for four months. Probably the most debilitating of all was that we were all completely infested with lice as we were cramped in any available barn each night. Need I add that dysentery was an acute integral part of the torturous march as well.

As for myself, at times, my thought of ever surviving the tortious ordeal hung by the tiniest of threads. The degradation, futility and hopelessness were prevalent to all of us yet we kept on taking one agonizing step more than by sheer force of will took just one more step.

One, of the several brutal atrocities that I personally witnessed, was when several soldiers were too weak to help their sick buddy to walk any further begged him to stand. A guard stepped up and promised to take him to a hospital. His friends assured their friend that he would be ok. We left them both there and as we rounded the next turn, we heard a single rifle shot and a few minutes later that guard that promised to take the sick soldier to the hospital, came hurrying around the corner to catch up. We booed and hissed at him but the guard just sneered and laughed it off. This made me ill, so I made my way up to the head of the column from then on so as not to witness such brutality that was being perpetrated on the weaker and most feeble. Thus, the name "The Death March" an epitaph to those that did not prevail and a life time of anguish for those of us that did.

There was no way I could possibly know how many more died on this tortuous march. I heard an unbelievable number that did not. All of us were fairly close to the

same condition as the man that fell, yet we had to continue the march for another two and a half more months. There were other inhumane atrocities that I witnessed that were unbelievably even more repulsive that I fervently wish I could forget. Thus, is the cruelty of man's inhumanities to man.

After one month on the march, I made one futile attempt to escape, but I was already too weak to succeed and was caught the following day. After being roughed up a bit, I was fortunate that my group had not moved that day least, I have no doubt, would have been shot on the spot but instead returned to the group. The guard, I was turned over to angrily ripped off took my dog tags and said "now you have no dog tags and a mixed uniform if you move right or left, it will not make any different to me, I will shoot you as a spy".

One thing that sustained me to a small degree was that I took a chance and did strolled off course into the edge of a sugar beet field and found a small sugar beet even though it was frozen I managed to gnaw on it for many days.

Three months after my attempt to escape we were approaching the boarder of Czechoslovakian when we began to hear the distinct rumble of the Russian artillery in the distance advancing from the Eastern front. A few days later when the rumble became much louder all of our guards left during the night except the one guard that held my dog tags; he sought me out the following morning among hundreds of other prisoners and, even though my unshaven sallow appearance had changed drastically he handed me my dog tags, and without saying a word, nodded turned and walked away.

The manifested hostility hatred and distain held by both the Russians and the Germans' for each other was beyond description. For Germans to be taken prisoner by the Russians would inevitably mean a severe beating for sure and to the death was a very distinct possibility. The Russian outcry was, "Never try to invade our country gain!".

Several German soldiers, possibly even our guards, noted my stripes and, approached me with their hands up in order to become an American prisoner. Even though I had no empathy for them I stopped one of our trucks and turned the Germans over to them. The driver objected strenuously and said, "What do you want me to do with them, Sarg?". I said, "That's your problem now" and I turned and walked away.

Now that we were all free, our first priority in our emaciated condition was to find a source of food. I chose a house owned by an elderly couple that had chickens visible from the street. At first, the elderly couple were extremely frightened but I assured them that I would not harm them and that I only needed food and when I started to catch one particular chicken. The couple both kept yelling, "kronka"; I thought they didn't want me to catch that particular chicken so that of course was the one I wanted. After they caught that chicken and killed and dressed it, they showed me the chickens' abscessed lungs. I learned "kronka" means sick and they wanted me to catch a good one. I could see in their eyes and furrowed brows their empathy as if to say, "Did we really cause this"?

As this delightful couple cooked me a meal I sponge bathed in copious amount of water; after this a meal was ready and as I painfully tried to sit on their hard stool and couldn't, the lady tapped my arm gently and literally ran to get me a pillow to sit on.

That night they gave me two twelve inch down ticks as a mattress and blanket; strangely, as they stood by watching, I felt safe and feel fast asleep almost immediately. The next morning, I thanked them profusely as they both escorted me to their outside gate and as I left them, they timidly waved good bye. After I laboriously walked approximately 50 yards or more, I turned and looked back and I saw them both still standing there watching. It seemed as though I had chosen a wonderful quant German couple that showed in their heart that they really cared. Perhaps, or just maybe, there is still some hope for this troubled world after all.

We were all emaciated when we were finally recaptured; to sit up straight was impossible because of the sharp pain on our raw tail bones striking a hard surface consequently we had to lean to one side in order to sit; that was extremely painful as well because of the terrible multiple painful pinches produced by the skin that receded between our ribs on the opposite side and we constantly and painfully bit the inside of our cheeks.

At this point I was loaded aboard a truck and the instant I painfully laid down on its steel bed I became an immediate victim of Post-Traumatic Syndrome; from that point at the East Border of Germany to the time I was dropped off at my mother's home in
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San Francisco I have, except of two ten second moments, had no memory; which had to have been at least two or three months later as I had already gained back my normal weight; I faintly remember someone saying, as I arrived at my mother's door saying "you will be alright now". Providence had had sustained me until I finally fell inside an American truck.

Lieutenant Walker looked me up in San Francisco, after the war, and stated that he was recommending me for the Congressional Medal of Honor. I was quite pleased and as we had dinner together in my home, he persisted on asking me what exactly did I do on all my missions and for the life of me I could not remember one single thing until months later.

When I drove him off at the airport sometime after dinner, we both expressed our deep disappointment. Approximately one year later, thanks to Lt. Walker's hard work in gathering witnesses, I was awarded the coveted Distinguished Service Cross, the Purple Heart, Combat Infantry Badge, Prisoner of War and the Belgium Croix De Guerre with Palms Ribbon, Belgium's highest civilian award. Lieutenant Walker wrote me later that several of my two squads had receive the Silver Star and that all 24 would also would receive the Silver Star if they could be located. Some of those are listed below.

Spec. 5 Ernest C. Gerry of F. Co. and from Co; H, Cpl. Herman W. Pace; Cpl. Lawrence J. Doer; Sgt. Roy D. Jensen; and Cpl. Clyde Mc. Daniel.

And so, this is our legacy that we leave to our grateful and wonderful Nation that we served with integrity and to the highest degree of our ability.

This is a true story of those of us who did our best to serve our country and did eventually returned home to our families but the real "heroes" were those thousands that did not.

Richard A. Thomas

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