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The Hand Not Given

The mists of memory now shroud my experiences in the last days of the battle and what followed. Only later did I learn that my personal disaster was called "The Battle of the Bulge". What remains of this early scar, inflicted in the young days of life, overlaid now with other hurts as severe and deep, acquired in the subsequent thirty-five years of living and surviving?

My division--the l06th--was at the very point of the massive enemy assault in the Ardennes Forest. Retreat or withdrawal was cut off. A break-through effort by our infantry was tried and failed. We then went forward in the direction of the West Wall to escape enemy pressure. Once again, we tried going back towards our lines. At one moment, our artillery vehicles were drawn up in a circle, frontier style. We proceeded to move out. Going through a valley, shells began to pour in on us. Bravely, a l05 mm gun crew set up, tried to reply, and was silenced by a hit.

After half an hour of mortar fire and shelling by 88mm anti-aircraft by the Germans, there was a shattering cry. ""Every man for himself" still echoes chillingly, carrying the message of aloneness and abandonment in the face of imminent destruction. A panoramic view flashes before me as I see hundreds of us, trapped, bewildered, defenseless...the release of captured German prisoners running back to their lines screaming for a halt in the firing until they were safe...my helmet flying from my head as face and body are pressed into the earth, seeking safety as shrapnel pours merciless hell, sharing the very ground sought as a haven..."Medic! Medic" is screamed out from those unfortunates already hit, and their pitiful cries still reverberate and chill me!

A brief respite from the shelling. White rags appear from nowhere...a panicked oozing of a line of our men, growing from a trickle into a heavy flow, moving towards the enemy lines. The invisible foe loosens briefly the ring of steel to gather the harvest of the stampeded and defeated American troops.

We were set down in a field, grouped then into long lines, and sent on a wandering, interminable march. We passed the Dragon's Teeth and anti-tank traps and block houses that were part of the Siegfried Line. We marched through Prum, a dead city, battered and broken. Even now, incredibly, I recall the beauty of the hills and streams of Luxembourg. Wearily putting one foot in front of the other, exhausted, we continued on. There could be no dropping out. Fantasy and reality interchanged places, and I still see the image of a German soldier, dead and frozen, sitting upright on his motorcycle.

At the railroad siding, a long train of cattle cars awaited. The loading of the dispirited prisoners began. Willie calls out, "Let's get on this box car". Dan says, "Let's get on the next one!"

Still I see short Willie. Clearer is the earlier image of him with a bandage around his head. Willie had been waylaid in Scully Square in Boston while on our last leave from the port of embarkation, Camp Miles Standish. He had been beaten and concussed, and he missed sailing with us on the USS Wakefield, our troop ship. He joined us later in England.

Dan was tall, spare, quiet spoken. For whatever reason--or none--I walked to the next cattle car, separating from Willie, accompanying Dan.

The stench of the manure-laden straw on the floor of the cattle car is smelled no more. Did we really pass three days without water or food? At last, relief! The delight of swallowing the icy cold wetness when the locked door opened at a siding! Our thirst-tortured bodies this slight but needed succor. The damp and metallic feel of the helmet-ful of water as it was passed from hand to hand! The urgent press of others' unslaked demands on the lucky ones who had first received the helmet! "That's enough! Pass it on!" was the repeated cry. Unsatisfied, one more brief swallow, and the precious gift was handed on. The drink was not nearly enough, not nearly long enough, but the container was given up to be fairly shared. Each of us received a couple of hard crackers, barely chewable, inadequate--but savored nonetheless.

Once more, the boxcar was locked. The high, piercing, tremulous whistle of the locomotive cut through the air. The boxcars smashed and jerked as other cars were added or taken off the train. There was the slow pull; halt; pull; halt; then forward once more until, finally, there was an established rhythm as the freight train won its freedom to continue its slow and weary pace. The quiet clacking of the wheels filled the air until progress was halted at another railway siding. Again and again this pattern was repeated. For us, crowded together, we had hours and hours of simply standing or sitting, waiting on the louse-ridden, foul-smelling straw.

The night. That night! Halted in a freight yard--it was Limburg. There was the sudden wailing of air raid sirens that cut through the stillness with their fearsome message. There was hysterical shouting by the soldiers guarding us as airplanes were heard passing over. Then came the shriek of bombs as one explosive followed another in the midnight rain of hell and terror. The bombs were coming closer and closer to our boxcar, destroying the boxcars and killing the helpless, hapless prisoners who could only listen as death crept up, nearer, nearer, nearer…

And now there is a scene that is indelibly branded in my mind. It cannot have been imagined because it is so clear and so well remembered. We did believe that we were in the last moments of our lives. I, the Jewish prisoner, was told "We are going to pray!" "I will , too," I remember saying. Men were on their knees. "Hail Mary, Mother of God"..., and a chorus of voices!

Only once since have I had occasion to be in a church, yet the prayer is part of me. How could this not have occurred?

As if in answer to the imploring cry of the trapped men, there was a scrabbling noise at the box car door. The lock was removed, and the door was pushed open. We jumped out of the wooden boxcar and ran, ran, ran, seeking safety wherever that might be. I sighted an embankment about six feet high some fifty or more feet away. Quickly, I covered that distance. On top of the wall was an enemy; foolishly, to get away from the terror behind I reached out my hand to be lifted up on the wall.

He looked. He moved away. Just that. He moved away. His statement. My memory. Man and man. Naive, then--and still today. Had he been low and I high, would I have acted differently? A desperate hand extended and no help given!

Sadly, I seem to have had the same experience several times since, in other contexts, surely the same empty act. The hand not given....

The bombing airplanes passed overhead and left. Stillness returned, the raid ended. Voices were again heard as the guards returned, excited and shouting and rounding up the prisoners .

English airmen bombed the Limburg rail yard in Germany on the night of December 23, 1944. Unknowing, they did their duty and they hit their target--the freight yard, the train--and us.

And Willie Warmuth died that night, killed but a few feet away. He died where I might have been if I had accompanied him. Would it have been me rather than Willie? And here he died in captivity, buried under tons of German dirt in that freight yard. Willie was going to be a journalist in Ohio. He uncle owned a newspaper there.

Who remembers Willie today?

I do. For as long as I shall live, he will be remembered. For a few brief years, I am his eternity.

I am alive because I did not accept his camaraderie and enter the same boxcar with him.

Willie is long gone, and when I think of him, I realize that I have had those years of life that he lost that dark and terrible night. What would he have done with those lost years? What have I?

And I think, too, of that hand not given. It is a memory of a foolish hurt. Unreasonable, yes, but lingering nonetheless.

In the years that have followed, then, there have been many wounds, some as rasping and deep, but these were some of my first; and they have endured, as I have, to this day.