

Sunny Italy

The 517th Combat Team was a miniature army by itself. The team included: rifle platoons, machine gun and mortar squads, 75 mm howitzers, field engineers, medical service, the supply and preparation of rations, all clothing, arms and ammunition. The Team even had mules. These animals were used as pack haulers in the mountains. In today's vernacular, the Team was a mini airborne army that could be transported anywhere planes could fly and gliders could land and engage the enemy in a mini-war.

The time had come for us to do our duty. To do what we were trained to do. We were trucked to a beach area on the Mediterranean near Naples some place. Naval LST's plowed toward shore. These ungainly upside down looking boxes didn't need a harbor or dock, they could nose onto any sloping beach and drop the big bow ramp. After bumping along for several hours on the water the craft eased to shore near Civitavecchia. We were equipped for combat, for war, live rounds, hand grenades and by someone's compassion a few pockets of rations. When all was ready we were trucked to the outskirts of Grosseto. From here on we moved to the, "front" as the Infantry always has, on foot.

I remember walking in a column along a road. Tall trees with overhanging branches paralleled the left side of the road. To the right was open country, a valley, then a gradual rise to tree covered high ground. Our pleasant hike was interrupted by the eerie scary sound of a German 88 millimeter shell hurling in our direction. As we hit the ground, the shell exploded overhead in the trees. Several more shells came screaming in, then silence. There were a few wounded as tree bursts tend to spew shrapnel over a greater distance. There being no small arms fire we continued on our way. This incident gave me a strange feeling of not being able to see one's opponent but knowing full well he has you under surveillance.

Just knowing that an 88 was somewhere out there instilled fear and respect in most of us. This formidable gun could hurl a shell about 3½ inches in diameter almost anywhere in any manner. It could be used as a rifle against aircraft or tanks and could penetrate armour up to four inches thick. Or the gun could be used as a howitzer or rifle against personnel.

Another day and another march. When the column stopped we dispersed to the ditches, to sit, recline, wet one's whistle, whisk out a K-ration, chat a little. The silence was broken by a solitary rifle shot. The sound was loud, clear and close. What happened? Someone accidentally shot himself in the foot, or so he said. Was this an act of cowardice or carelessness? No matter, he was not the first to take this course of action. Most of us shared the same opinion that if this was an act of cowardice, better now than in the heat of battle when we may need him the most.

On our way again, this time we fanned out, stalking up a gradual rise covered with brush, vegetation and small trees. Nearing the crown I made a dash over the top and dove for cover behind a fair sized tree. I didn't see any obvious movements or hear any sounds from the direction of the enemy. Peering intently I noticed a man sitting with his back against a tree. Did I have the drop on an enemy? Did I want the drop on the enemy? Without being threatened how could I justify a meek stranger as an enemy? Should I shoot a helpless sitting man, a human being in cold blood? I had trouble with this emotional feeling for a long time. What kind of a soldier was I going to be? Reacting in self defense may be acceptable, but for me to strike the first blow is contrary to my nature. I chickened and just watched him. He never moved.

Was he sleeping? Should I be brave and take my first prisoner. Cautiously I stood up with the rifle at the ready and moved gingerly toward the enemy. There was no movement or sign of recognition on his part and I noticed his eyes were open. Something was amiss. I gently nudged him with the gun barrel horrified to find he was a corpse. He was older than I and had darker skin. I thought he may have been a Turk or a Moslem. We came from different parts of the world meeting here as strangers and by our respective government's decree we're enemies.

I learned later that the enemy had a policy of forcing conquered able bodied men into their army. The enemy even had a name for this malarkey, kanonenfutter, translated that means, cannon fodder. The corpse I stumbled across was one of those fodders.

This war stuff was scary. I remember one occasion when things went from bad to worse. I was hungry, dirty, tired, miserable, emotionally low.

While in this mood I was trapped, pinned down by a barrage of small arms fire. My mind exploded! "How rough can it get?" I didn't speak out loud so didn't expect an answer, I was just venting my frustration. Having some Christian teachings the thought occurred, was this mental concept addressed to my God? And if so, am I asking Him to reveal how bad things can get? Surely I didn't want the answer to that question. Quickly I mentally responded, "Forget the question! I never want to know how bad things can get."

This one sided dialogue proved to be a revelation. I perceived that no matter what might befall and betide, things could possibly be worse. This perception would not change the situation, but it might make the mental burden lighter, relieve the stress and anxiety and make life a little more tolerable. This perspective made me realize that all was not lost or hopeless and gave me courage and strength to continue, not succumb to despair. This experience taught me to accept the pitfalls of life. I learned that any given incident if not life threatening was just a temporary inconvenience. I learned to appreciate the value of simple necessities like breathing, eating and keeping the body warm.

"There is an old expression, 'the nakedness of the battlefield.' It is descriptive and full of meaning for anyone who has seen a battle, the feeling that prevades the forward areas is loneliness. There is little to be seen; friend and foe, as well as the engines of war, seem to disappear from sight when troops are deployed for a fight. Each man feels himself so much alone, and each is prey to the human fear and terror that to move or show himself may result in instant death."

General Dwight Eisenhower ¹³

I know the feeling. The reality of combat, the actual shooting, made me lonely and afraid. I felt inadequate for the job. There were too many unforeseen factors and circumstances beyond my control. I needed some encouragement, some assurance to bear this burden called war. And there was no one to turn to for help. Thinking of my religious upbringing I asked God, "This is too big for me to handle by myself. I need all the help I can get. Give me courage and strength. Please help me." And I believe He did. I have never forgotten that incident or the prayer.

Around the middle of July we were relieved from front line duty, trucked back near Frascati, a village about 10 miles south of Rome and bivouacked in an olive grove. Our mission was to rest, recuperate, rehabilitate and fraternize with the natives, especially those in Rome. Exchanging gunfire with the enemy is called combat duty and I along with many others was awarded the Combat Infantry Badge, a metal with the wreath and rifle. This badge is awarded for exemplary behaviour in combat.

During combat duty there were no set routines, no eight hour days, regular meals or convenient hygiene facilities. Various rations were brought to the forward areas, such as canned foods, crackers with cheese, a high protien candy bar, foods we could use or prepare whenever time and opportunity arose. Hot meals were few and far between. On occasion field kitchens were set up within walking distance toward the rear. After make shift chow lines were set up we would eat in groups on a rotating basis. Someone always had to stay and mind the "store." Bathing was a rarity. On rare occasions portable group showers were set up, again within walking distance. At this time we got clean clothing, rations and cigarettes.

Daily rituals like shaving and brushing teeth were no simple matter. We learned to improvise and use a canteen cup of water for brushing teeth. Toothpaste? Sometimes we had, but most times we didn't. The brave learned to wash and shave with a helmet of cold water. But nothing was ever done on a regular schedule. We all had stubble once in a while but never full beards. Beards had a tendency to harbor dirt and filth and I think a military taboo. There were times when we were a filthy, ragged, scraggly, motley looking bunch.

I visited Rome several times and the main highway route passed two historical ruins that I recognized. They were the Colosseum and parts of the aqueduct. I knew they were ancient and dated from the Roman Empire. The aqueducts must have been an engineering feat considering the magnitude of the water system and the simple mechanical equipment at that time.

The Colosseum reminded me of a story I read when I was a youth. A story about a Christian boy named Daniel. I learned later the Colosseum was built around 80 AD. It was constructed as an arena for sporting events, seating about 50,000 spectators. A popular event was physical combat between wild beasts and gladiators or wild beasts and christians. This was viewed as entertainment at that time and later nothing more than gory torture.

Today men confront each other within the confines of a roped ring with combat in mind with the crowd urging them on as in times past. Civilization is more humane minded nowadays: the wild beasts have been spared and separated into their own arena, cock against cock, pit bull against pit bull. In some parts of the world, the bull is still pitted against man. I guess in all reality things haven't changed all that much. What passes as gory torture by some may be labeled acceptable entertainment by others.

While in Rome, I remember walking along a street and when reaching what would have been a corner or intersection there wasn't any. The street lead to a vast open circular area. Powers of recollection told me this

was Saint Peter's Square. On the opposite side was St. Peter's Basilica. I gawked dumfounded as I strolled into the square, envisioning money changers and the babbling sounds of the multitudes and here I was in the midst of all this activity. I didn't know I was treading on the roots of Catholicism and the seat of the Vatican. I didn't know that guy named Simon, also known as Peter was entombed here. I didn't comprehend the significance or importance of what I was looking at. This enlightenment came later.

One other experience sticks in my mind, I remember being in an orchard. There were some trees laden with dark red colored fruit, shaped like pears only smaller. My mind said fig, but never seeing any growing from a tree I wasn't sure. Breaking one open exposed a bunch of seeds and red juice ran all over my fingers. The seeds confirmed my suspicion, indeed these were figs. I was treated to tree ripened figs, another delicacy. In my neighborhood figs were available only in dry form or in cookies. After tasting one of these, the other kind don't even come near to what a fig tastes like.

By this time my tour of Italy was coming to an end. I sensed this when the unit was restricted to the camp ground and replacements arrived making the regiment over strength. This is the army's method of replacing casualties before they occur. The General's had our destiny signed, sealed and delivered. Our training as paratroopers would soon be put to the test. Our shining hour, if you want to call it that, was drawing near. We all knew something was about to happen. And happen it did but that's another story in another country.

French Riviera

Shrubs and saplings entangled with vines limited our view of a little village. We saw a sign post by the side of the road, but the wording was indistinct. To reach our military objective we had to establish our present position. Our objective was indicated on a postage stamp size map. To those that don't know, a map has little value if one's location on the map is unknown. Possibly the drop zone was missed altogether rendering the map completely useless. Our immediate concern was to find out where we were.

The day was 15 August 1944 and the invasion of Southern France. The Generals code named this operation Dragoon. The airborne mission was to take and secure a road junction at Le Muy to prevent enemy reinforcements from reaching the coastal areas. We were briefed in the dark of night, on the tarmac next to the reliable Douglas C-47 Skytrain. The parachute jump to be executed before daybreak.

Anywhere else it may have been the beginning of a pleasant day, but not here, not now. Apprehension built as the plane disappeared from view. Within seconds I lost all human contact and the feeling of security that goes with it. I was alone, helpless, and afraid. Here I was over French soil occupied by the enemy. All too soon I would experience war first hand once again.

I had a bird's eye view of the earth below. Some vegetation, shrubs, grape vines, steep sided hills, with some stone walled terraces creating isolated patches of level plowed bare earth, even dreaded trees. There was no turning back as gravity was in control drawing me to an unknown fate. This is the time when rabbit's feet and four leaf clovers have their brief moment of power, I had neither.

I managed to land unscathed. I scrambled to release the harness, stash the chute, secure the firearm, prepare to face the enemy. Fortunately there was no enemy for by now I could have been a casualty or a prisoner. Such is the realities of war.

Hearing no gun fire I assumed there was no immediate danger. There was no enemy nor any one else. The type of terrain and vegetation obscured us from each other. I sighed with relief when I heard an American voice. At least there were two of us. It didn't take long before a small group of us were gathered together. It was at this time we had to determine where we were. I was surprised when some one offered to take a closer look at the sign post. It never occurred to me to step forward to act as a leader. I was only nineteen and up till now always told what to do.

Anxiously awaiting his return the silence was broken with the rattle of rapid gunfire. We jumped, dove, scurried to get as close to Mother Earth as any desperate man would. I wound up lying length wise in one of those furrows. The furrow resembled a long valley flanked by little hills on both sides. Toward the far end I saw a little puff of dust. Then another puff of dust but this time closer. Then another puff closer still. It looked like rain drops striking the bare dry earth. But it wasn't raining. The gun fire stopped as suddenly as it started. Mysteriously the little puffs of dust ceased at the same time. It was only then I realized what occurred.

I didn't comprehend the gravity of the situation until the danger was over. I shudder with fear as I discern what might have happened had the gunfire continued. My reprieve from ultimate destiny was caused by unknown circumstances or forces beyond my control. I don't know why. There is always speculation, but speculation has no definite answer.

I raise my face skyward, "Thank you for giving me another day, for others were not as fortunate as I."

The guy that went to check the sign post burst through the bushes babbling away, pointing to his helmet as he babbled on and on. Smack dab in the center of his helmet was a bullet hole and in the back center was the jagged exit hole. Now we understood why he was excited and kept babbling on and on. All of us readily perceived what might have been if the bullet had been a smidgen lower. And they say close only counts in the game of horse shoes. I disagree, I learned that at any moment, death is very close indeed.

Continuing the story, we established our position, cautiously we made our way around the village of Le Muy and headed in a northwesterly direction to the village of La Motte, F company's objective. Resistance was scattered and light. The enemy was just as disorganized as we were. Our objective was accomplished as we secured the village. Road blocks were set up and while I was helping to man one a four door convertible command car approached. We caught the enemy by complete surprise, they were unsuspecting and not prepared to resist. We treated them with

dignity, as dedicated soldiers to their country and they returned the respect. Not a shot was fired as we captured four prisoners.

Supplies were brought in by gliders, a most welcome sight. I hate to say it, but, being a glider pilot is very hazardous duty. They were skillful and courageous but so many had to be carried away after landing. If I remember rightly the beach forces caught up to us on the third day. All of us were thankful as we waved and cheered them on as they rode past with their tanks, half tracks, trucks and jeeps. For one, waving was not enough, he climbed aboard a half track waved his rifle in his free hand and hollered out, "See you guys." He disappeared just like rising smoke from a chimney. We never saw him after that. One enthusiastic unit that made history in many ways also passed our way. I mention this because I'll always remember the Japanese Americans as they rode past displaying their dedicated patriotism.

This military spearhead, the first wave of assault or invasion forces earned me and many others that day the right to wear the Bronze Service Arrow head. This decoration is given to the ones's that served with the initial assault forces that participated in actual combat against the enemy. I survived another military battle.

Another day and another place, we were moving along as a column through a man made cut somewhat similar to a railroad cut. There were shallow ditches along each side flanked with steep banks that rose above eye level. The cut appeared to be like a tunnel without any roof. A level convenient path to travel perhaps, but I envisioned an open casket. Then we heard a distinctive sound, one every soldier recognizes. A bolt forceably being rammed shut. Reflexively, in unison we dove into the ditches. Automatic fire whistled through the cut, some one ahead used a gernade for mutual benefit and with additional assistance the "road block" was removed. No casualties on our side this time, but the potential was always there.

Continuing to plod eastward day after day we eventually reached the foothills of the Maritime Alps. Near the end of another day we reached a wooded area on some high ground. Eastward from the cover of the woods was an open valley and a quaint little village on the next hill-top. The near side of the hill sloped gradually downward, completely open, without any protective cover of any kind. Across the valley the hillside was terraced with stone, resembling steps ascending to the village.

A patrol was formed to scout the village to determine the enemies presence and strength. We spread out, strolled cautiously over the crown of the hill, down the hillside, ever alert for danger. We moved randomly, leisurely, to the valley floor drawing no enemy fire. The ones in front paused at the first stone terrace. Some of the others slowly saught

safety behind the terrace. I was tired, looked around deciding if I should squat and rest for a bit. The idea of rest was inviting but somehow I sensed I was in a very vulnerable position. I moseyed up to the stone terrace, joining the rest of the group. This turned out to be one of my better decisions. Upon reaching the stone wall all heck let loose as automatic fire raked the valley floor. The patrol succeeded in verifying that the enemy was in the quaint little village. There was no mortar fire so we stayed put, rested a while then after dusk gradually made our way back.

Once again I was most grateful for being spared. When one is tired and exhausted it is so easy to become careless and complacent. But I couldn't figure out what motivated me to seek the safety of the stone terrace.

The next day our artillery sent the morning mail to the enemy and we resumed our journey to Italy. We plodded down the slope, up and over the terraces to the quaint village and beyond, ever eastward.

Most of the time we advanced cross country over hill, dale and mountain. Roads were easily defended or mined and the bridges usually destroyed. Supply trucks had difficulty reaching us. Not because of the distance but rather the trucks couldn't get here from there. We never seemed to run out of necessities like ammunition and cigarettes but at times food was scarce. Our big pockets might have an emergency D ration which was a high energy and very hard chocolate bar which might stave hunger pangs but not starvation.

I remember a span of three days without any food at all. We spent the night in a wooded area and when daylight came we saw a village on the next rise. We envisioned food, water and maybe some wine from the welcoming French inhabitants. We had a green Lieutenant at the time and sensed, that due to his inexperience, he was reluctant to leave the cover of the woods without supporting artillery. Only problem was our artillery was several blown up bridges behind, unless the combat engineers had made make shift crossings. Anyway here we were with our pants sliding over our hips for lack of nourishment and perhaps there was food ahead. Hunger, too, is a great motivator.

We were stewing and fuming by inactivity and wanted to get on with it. Someone said he was going to ring the church bell in the belfry and get the show on the road. And he did, several times, and there was no response or return fire. The Lute took the hint and bellowed, "Move Out!"

About half way or so to the village we heard vehicles approaching from our rear. In moments our chow trucks came barreling along headed for the village. We cheered, waved and charged. By the time we got to the village square the field stoves were fired up, garbage cans of water for

coffee were steaming and the chow line was being set up in the main street. We were still soldiers so every building and basement was searched and a few frightened enemy were rounded up. The hot meal was so good and was topped off with recent vintage wine.

Approaching the village of Col de Braus, the mountains became steeper and higher. I remember one road winding back and forth up a mountain side with switch back hair pin bends. One advantage to fighting in the mountains is there is always one relatively safe side. But going through a pass and becoming exposed to enemy fire usually invites disaster. To make matters worse we were nearing the eastern border of France and the mountains were laced with bunkers. This was the situation as we neared the village of Col de Braus. After climbing up the switch back road and then through a gradual pass we were stopped in our tracks. Any further movement drew tons of exploding iron. Our light arms, mortars and howitzers were ineffective. We had nothing at our disposal that could penetrate the bunkers. We were pure and simple outgunned. We were stymied, that is until flame throwers were brought forward. This may sound rather cruel and inhumane but the rules of combat are similar to the rules of knife fighting. Rule number one; There ain't no rules.

Another time we were plodding all day long, slowly and tediously ever upward until darkness closed upon us once again. We were told to disperse and dig in for the night. I was so tired, I just sat down, braced my back against a tree, too tired to care about anything. All was quiet except for muffled sounds here and there of scratching GI shovels. Someone near by was digging a fox hole, making more noise than the others. He was going at it at a vigorous pace. This was my last recollection because I fell asleep right where I dropped with my back against the tree. I slept very sound, so sound that I didn't hear the mortar shells until they announced their exploding arrival. I was caught off guard, complacent, no precautions taken, and yet woke up to see another day. It was ironic that the efforts of the guy near by, the one that tried so hard to protect himself, although well intended, were for naught. Why him? Why not me? Same old questions. Never an answer. From experiences such as these we learn first hand that chance and circumstance influence the outcome of one's endeavors.

The light of day revealed a craggy, rocky landscape. Looking easterly through a pass the vista changed from scraggy mountain sides to open sky. We finally arrived atop one of the highest peaks in Southern France. The elevations being in the neighborhood of 5 to 6 thousand feet. Soon it would be all down hill to Italy. The name has a familiar ring.

Trekking along, the pass narrowed and flattened somewhat and formed a path or byway. The right or southerly side of the pass decreased in

height then gradually slopped downward to a little valley. The right side of the byway now was open, the actual limit being a crest, then descending to an open valley just below. The left side became a sheer cliff rising vertically up to the peak. The byway then opened to a relatively flat plateau. The westerly side of the plateau was ringed by the cliff. The easterly and northerly limit of the plateau by a crest swooping in a great horizontal semi-circular curve. The plateau was a natural overlook. The panorama to the east was most impressive. Off in the distance miles away was another hazy mountain range extending from right to left as far as one could see. Peering from the easterly crest of the plateau, we could see all the way down the mountain side, a long unbroken steep downgrade to the valley which must have been several thousand feet or more below. We had an unobstructed view of the village of Sospel which was nested astride the Bevera River that coursed through the vast valley. This was the most easterly village in all of France and was ringed by concrete pillboxes.

I never saw so much of the world by standing in one place in my life. One could pan their eyes from right to left about 180 degrees, and from a straight ahead horizontal view downward about 80 degrees to the valley floor. A real live natural panorama. The view was spectacular, almost like looking from the edge of the earth. The valley extending as far as one could see from right to left. There was complete silence as if the vast space was soaking up the sounds. But then there was nothing near to emit any sound. This was the Brevera Valley and the end of the trail, our final destination. Orders were to hold the high ground. This was to become our temporary, permanent home for months to come.

Several outposts were established around the perimeter of the plateau overlooking the valley. The main body retraced their steps back along the byway to the craggy rocky area where we spent the night before. One of my duties was to set up field telephones between the outposts and the rear echelon.

Temporarily the war had calmed down for us. We could relax and give our feet a much needed rest. We had adequate stores and supplies. An environment almost approaching the level of comfort. The conditions were right for one to become careless and complacent and were contributing factors to the outcome of several incidents. Another factor in one encounter was the topography of the byway connecting the forward outposts and the rear echelon.

During this entrenchment I was the daily contact between the rear echelon and the outposts. I traveled as light as possible carrying a light carbine instead of the heavy M 1 rifle. My primary mission was to keep the telephone lines in functioning order. A secondary function that just happened to evolve was relaying happenings back and forth. I was usually heralded with acclamation.

On one occasion, one member in the outpost made it known that the day was his birthday. Almost anything was cause for festivities, but this event offered a legitimate reason. We built a campfire, gathered around, sat down and exchanged stories of civilian life, line encounters and aspirations of things to come. A jovial atmosphere, enjoying each others companionship, oblivious of the war. Through our carelessness we became boisterous and loud. We got carried away, forgetting we were soldiers and still at war.

We didn't hear the deadly mortar shell until seconds before it exploded upon impact. Not enough time to take cover, one little piece of schrapnel to a vital organ and another life is snuffed out. A grim reminder we were still at war and it was not the time for revelry.

Whenever the enemy became too rambunctious a piper cub airplane would appear out of nowhere and circle like an eagle seeking prey. This was our clue to take cover. The plane was on our side directing fire from a naval ship way out in the Mediterranean Sea and the cause for our concern. Those 16 inch shells were mighty big, weighing in the neighborhood of about one ton. Just thinking of the size scared us. We knew the effective range was about 20 miles, give or take a mile either way. We knew we were about a mile higher than the ship at sea but didn't know if this reduced the effective range or not. The shell had to clear the mountains and hopefully us as well in order to hit the target which we assumed were the concrete pillboxes. We knew about deviation and elevation on a small scale but not the effect on a distance such as twenty miles. Then the most reliable unreliable factor of all, human fallibility. We were handicapped with this limited knowledge and was the basis for our concern. So when the plane showed up we sought a crack or cranny and watched the big can come floating over our right shoulder with a swish, swish then disappear down into the valley. The explosion kept echoing back and forth from one mountain range to the other. It may sound strange to holler, "All clear," when our own plane left the scene, but it's true.

This next encounter is a very personal one. Upon awaking one morning the forward outposts could not be reached by telephone. Unbeknownst to us in the rear echelon, was that the outposts saw the enemy enmasse scaling the hillside, and in particular nearing the crest of the byway, cutting off their path of retreat. Seeing they were out numbered and fearing they were no match they scaled around the northerly slope and at this moment were on their way back to the rear echelon. This route was hazardous and not used, there was never any need to do so. That was the situation as I headed down the byway, alone as I always did. The men from the outposts were headed for safety whereas I was headed the other way.

As I meandered along I kept one eye on the phone line and the other where I was going. Unexpectedly just below the crest I saw three helmets jotting through the underbrush. We must have surprised each other, as neither of us were in a ready firing position. They responded faster than I did, I hit the ground as their rifle fire zinged over head. I grabbed a grenade, pulled the pin and held it momentarily, very momentarily. The enemy being so close I didn't want to give them time to throw the grenade back at me. I lobbed the grenade and as soon as it exploded I jumped up, fired the carbine rapidly in the general direction, turned around and ran like all get out. Seems fear is a great motivator for bursts of speed.

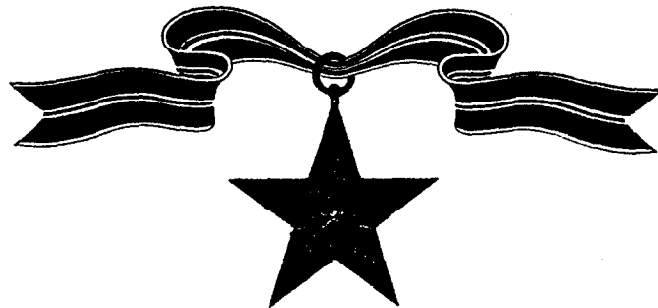
I ran right into a patrol that was sent out to check on my welfare. Boy did I greet them with enthusiasm. When I told the Lieutenant what had happened I must have been in a state of shock as I babbled on and on about my narrow escape, expressing a very selfish concern for my welfare. In time I calmed down realizing once again I was spared.

Once again I was fortunate and grateful, it was time for thanksgiving not venting anger. In this encounter the cards were stacked against me. I was dealt a poor hand, and yet once again I was spared. I believe some one up above was smiling on me. No doubt about it, this war was confirming my faith. In time a soldier learns to be ever alert and aware of the unheralded happenstance. Survival although dependent on one's actions is not always the deciding factor. One's life is held in balance by a little piece of metal, smaller than a man's finger, about 5/16" in diameter and about 3/4" long, being propelled about 1700 MPH. This hurling piece of deadly steel, piercing flesh, rending a vital organ combined with the wrong time and wrong place is the difference between life and death. Add human carelessness to that combination and one's chance for survival becomes rather slim and as the saying goes, that's all she wrote, there ain't no more. And the government sends a telegram to somebody's mother, We regret...

After this incident I was given a three day pass to the French resort city of Nice, and later awarded the Bronze Star medal for Heroic Achievement during a military operation against an enemy. The newspaper account reads as follows:

He (I) kept telephone line between two American units in constant repair, although under constant enemy fire and menaced by German patrols. Once trapped by three Germans he killed two with a grenade and the third with his carbine.

I accept with honor the recognition for a job well done. But the news account almost implies the decoration was given for destroying the enemy. I abhor such a thought, unfortunately this was a by product of



THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO ALL WHO SHALL SEE THESE PRESENTS, GREETING: THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AUTHORIZED BY EXECUTIVE ORDER, 24 AUGUST 1962 HAS AWARDED

THE BRONZE STAR MEDAL

TO PRIVATE FIRST CLASS HOWARD W. RUPPEL, UNITED STATES ARMY

FOR meritorious achievement in ground combat against the armed enemy during World War II in the European African Middle Eastern Theater of Operations.

GIVEN UNDER MY HAND IN THE CITY OF WASHINGTON
THIS 15th DAY OF February 1991


THE ADJUTANT GENERAL




SECRETARY OF THE ARMY

self preservation. At the time, under the circumstances it was an instinctive reaction for survival.

Combat duty besides being hazardous to one's health, exposes one to many confusing concepts. When circumstances become unbearable the experienced soldier with some sense of humor; the ability to laugh at one's self, has a better chance to retain his sanity than the serious minded fellow. The one's that viewed life seriously were the one's that had difficulty accepting hardships, inconveniences, sufferings and privation. They took the war with all the detriments as a very personal thing. They could not find any peace or joy in day to day living. These serious minded soldiers were susceptible to go berserk. The reason I state this is because I saw one serious dedicated soldier break down. A situation developed that became more than he could tolerate. It happened like this.

The company headquarters was in a regular house a mile or so to the rear. I remember being in a room with several others. Our Captain was seated at a table interrogating two prisoners. We were spell-bound and shocked as these prisoners revealed atrocities to American prisoners. Then by surprise a guy grabbed one of the prisoners, spun him around, shoved him into a closet while drawing his revolver, and before anyone could intervene, bam, bam, bam three shots rang out. Instantly he was subdued. The revelation of a hideous act prompted one to act likewise. I hung my head with shame and compassion. It is sad and pathetic to see a friend break down, worse to witness an act of atrocity, then being confused which was the lesser of the evils; the revelation of an atrocity, the retaliatory atrocity in like manner or the mental break down. I guess it's better to view with pity and compassion than to judge, I saw what happened but I don't know why it happened.

Getting back to the war, I had a bout with dysentery and went to a hospital located at DiJon. I had a bed in a long room, with a lot of south facing windows. The room was sunny, bright, cozy and pleasant. The surroundings were very comfortable but being afflicted with amoebic dysentery, I wasn't. I must have had a severe case as I was in the hospital for at least a month. Never really got completely cured, certain foods had an adverse effect for many years thereafter. One day the tone of familiar voices in the hallway attracted my attention. Curiously I watched the doorway and in a moment got a fleeting glimpse of two movie stars, Mickey Rooney and Donald O'Connor. Small world isn't it? I guess everybody got caught up in this war.

Upon leaving the hospital I was given a furlough with a choice of locations, the French Riviera or London, England. I opted for the city of London. I was really seeing the world. When leaving the city of DiJon I remember riding a regular train, with other French civilians.

The French cars had small rooms, unlike the long open American coaches. There was a short lay-over at Paris at which time I was able to stroll about the downtown area. I just remember a big congested city. I crossed the English Channel on a ferry boat and the ride was long and far enough to almost make me sea sick.

Arriving in England I rode on another train that pulled into Victoria Station, which was the biggest and brightest railroad station I ever saw. There was a lot of glass in the upper part of the walls as well as sky lights in the roof. Walked to a nearby USO. USO means United Service Organization. These were places that were open to any and all service men and provided food, drink, temporary lodging, information and help, which were located almost everywhere. Spent the night between sheets, just like home, or a hospital. Got to see Buckingham Palace, the English Parliament with those colorfully dressed and militarily mannered guards. Saw London Bridge, then spent several days with a private family.

The English were eager to help and entertain the Americans. The dining room was huge with a matching huge dining table and came with a butler and a maid. Liquids during the meal were juices, water or wine. Coffee was always served after the meal in a separate room. A very pleasant relaxing leave from the inconveniences and hardships of the war.

About this time the enemy launched another military offensive, this one in the Ardennes Forest and later called the battle of the bulge. The Ardennes was a vast pine forested area covering parts of Belgium and Luxembourg. But that's another story in a couple of other countries.

Ardennes

The German attack began on 16 December 1944, with an artillery barrage from 2,000 guns along an 80 mile front. They drove a wedge or salient as the Generals call it, through parts of Belgium and Luxembourg almost to the Meuse river, a distance of about 50 miles. The battle ultimately involved a million men. By the middle of January the opposing armies were almost back to where they were before the battle started. Historians tell us this battle was one of the worst of the entire war. Losses in guns, tanks, trucks and equipment was enormous on both sides. Total fatalities, about 190,000 plus the entire destruction or loss of guns, tanks, trucks and all the other armaments of war. I was in it, darn near froze and the army awarded the Ardennes Battle Ribbon to all the survivors, which included me.

The Battle of the Bulge reminds me of beautiful pine forests, open rolling fields, fresh fallen snow, quaint little villages, frost bite, trench foot, lots of casualties and being wet, cold, hungry, tired and exhausted.

Returning to France I was whisked to Liege, Belgium. It was a temporary stop before rejoining the unit that was somewhere on the north or right flank of the enemy's salient. Liege was in the flight path of the new unmanned flying bomb, the V I. The bomb was like a little airplane with wings and flew in a relatively flat trajectory. The engine's drone warned of it's arrival which could be heard before the bomb came into view. The V I stirred fear but was hindered by announcing it's arrival. The buzz bomb as we called it was an infant in the new generation of jet propulsion.

Some time during this hectic period December 25th rolled around and each of us received a hot meal, a complete meal in a separate container, some what like when the pizza man knocks on the door, the hot meal just showed up. On this Christmas day in 1944 I was mighty grateful and thankful for, "just being around," and not losing the, "Gift of life." Solemnly I said, "Happy Birthday."

Some time before Christmas the 517th entered the battle without me and engaged the enemy at several places in Belgium. The primary mission was to contain the enemy and establish a stable line of resistance. After gaining ground in one direction it was not unusual to be counter attacked from either flank. The forward attack was diverted 90 degrees and continued in full fury. Confusion ruled. Positions changed as rapidly as the clock ticked. Orders when received were late and at times disregarded as conditions had changed and the orders were perceived to be suicidal. The initial mission was the over riding goal, establish a stable line of defense. Where, could only be established by battle field conditions.

Little villages attained infamy by soldiers bloodshed. Villages with names like Soy, Hotton, Haid-Hits, Marcouray, Sur-Les-Hys, Manhay, Dochamps, Samree, Freyneux, Lamormenil, Fraiture, Stavelot, St. Vith, and then there was the hideous massacre of about 80 American prisoners near Malmedy.

After about a week of combat duty the unit was pulled back to lick their wounds and regroup. They were deployed in the pine forests along the road leading from Liege to Manhay. About this time I rejoined the group. Envision a thick forest of pine trees, the branches sagging under the weight of the snow, and lots of fresh fallen snow. Seems snow has the ability to soak up sounds, lending an eerie quality to the still air.

Fighting the enemy has always been the object of war I guess. But the weather elements, the cold and snow was an additional enemy that took it's toll. Supplies were brought to us and we were free to pick and choose. White mattress covers were available which were to be used as camouflage. One had a choice, a perceived concealment or a strait-jacket. I felt survival depended more on freedom of mobility rather than blending with the elements. And was the same reason I shunned the heavy overcoat. One was too restricted and slowed by the weight of the coat or the cumbersome cover. So I continued to wear the green field jacket, with two shirts, a pair of trousers, two pair long johns, a knit cap under the helmet, two pair socks and then when I tried to find galoshes was dismayed to learn there weren't any large enough to slip over the trooper boots. I managed to get a small sized pair of rubber buckle galloshes that would keep the feet dry for protection against trench foot. At times there are no easy choices, so with moist eyes I shucked the paratrooper boots and pulled on the galoshes. I could understand how a cowboy feels when he is forced to shoot his fallen horse. And of course gloves, this was my uniform of the day, wardrobe for the night and protection against the winter weather elements.

Fresh snow covered pine forests and meadows unblemished by man or beast may be a picturesque scene to look at, but not to live in, espec-

ially when there is no escape and you are compelled to live in the stuff day and night suffering from the effects like: cold wet feet from wet boots, no dry place to sit, squat, kneel or prop the firearm. Simple walking becomes a concentrated effort, each step planned, not spontaneous, feeling for firm footing as one goes along. Plodding over relatively flat terrain is the easy part, then come the gulleys, slippery slopes and ravines sinking up to the keister. Snow hides unforeseen depressions, stumps and fallen branches. When sliding down a slope or tumbling ankle over tea kettle the outburst is the same as any other miscue, as in golf or bowling... "Oh S..t." Any appreciation of the beauty of snow is just a memory of one's youth.

The unit returned to the shooting war by plodding through knee deep snow toward Trois Ponts. What we weren't carrying we didn't have. The weather cleared which usually brings lower temperatures and this was no exception. It was dark when we finally stopped and dispersed among the pine trees with expectations of getting some rest. We were cold, wet, hungry and exhausted. Pangs of hunger were long gone. I was tired and exhausted, just wanted to collapse and sleep. I hacked off some pine boughs and stacked them into a pile to lie on, to serve as insulation from the snow and cold.

I laid on the pine boughs, removed the galoshes so my feet could get some air and perhaps evaporate the moisture from the socks, covered the best I could with some more boughs. Being active all day the clothing absorbed some perspiration and the damp long johns became an ice pack. I was shivering and fatigued, craving sleep, visualizing being warm. Shivering tensed the muscles, how could I relax? I was exhausted yet sleep wouldn't come. In time the cold was not as severe, some comfort in that, and I began to drowse. I didn't feel any warmer, just didn't feel as cold. Strange I didn't feel as cold and yet not warm either. Was my mind playing tricks on me? Maybe I couldn't sense the cold? If I couldn't sense the difference between cold and warm what did I sense? The perception startled me with a jolt! WAS I GETTING NUMB? TINGES OF FROST BITE!

Perceiving the danger of falling asleep I now had to stay awake. A while ago I craved sleep and now ironically was compelled to stave it off. I walked around, paced, moved the arms and legs exercise fashion to encourage circulation, generate body heat and stay awake. I kept moving throughout the long cold night. The hint of dawn assured my survival and would see another day. I was still cold but so grateful to feel anything at all. I was very much obliged to you know who. What did I learn from this? I learned that one can only get so cold, after that numbness sets in. When this happens one can say with all honesty it doesn't get any colder then that. I learned the sensation of cold is dependent on other factors, like wind, humidity, wet or dry cloths, not temperature alone. I learned some new words like, wind chill, ex-

posure, hypothermia, frost bite and trench foot. I learned that I don't need a thermometer on the wall indicating I'm comfortable or should be.

Leaving the cover of the woods the next day, the unit advanced through Trois Ponts with little difficulty. There was no cover beyond the village, nothing but a vast open snow covered field slowly rising upward to another isolated pine forest. F company was to advance along the west bank of the Salm river which was overgrown with shrubs and trees providing some concealment and protect the units left flank. Another worry spot was a commanding hill across the river to the left front of the advance. Two companies moved out across the open field without drawing enemy fire until they were fully exposed, then the enemy let go with every available artillery piece. The companies were caught in a cross fire coming from the two forward wooded hills. They were trapped as the slightest movement drew volleys of enemy fire. F company with some cover fared better. I was still cold and hungry but thankful I was around, I had no complaints. We withdrew under the cover of darkness, stumbling through the white manure. Each of us muttering choice words of encouragement to get the hell out of here. After dark, over 100 dead, dying or wounded young American boys were removed from that field.

After a few hours rest, we were ordered once again, to take the high ground! After learning the hard way, the unit circled to the left, way around and waited for the cover of darkness. Then we went like circus elephants, hanging on to the guy in front because it was so dark and we infiltrated almost all the way to yesterdays objective. When day light came the enemy was surprised, we weren't, they lost, we won, a day late and 100 men short.

Time, ammunition and lives were expended moving from one wood lot to the next wood lot or village. Closing in on St. Vith, heavy resistance was encountered in several villages along the way. This time tanks joined us as we waited in one of those piney woods. An open snow covered field that sloped downward to the troublesome village lay before us. The snarling of the engines inspired us with grandiose feelings of power and strength. Suddenly every tank commenced firing toward the village, then as the tanks lurched forward we lurched, stumbled, fell and plodded in, around and among all that heavy armor moving as one mighty fighting machine all the while the tanks cannons spewing fire, smoke and whistling steel. The shells that were made somewhere back in the States were now on their final delivery to the enemy. It was one of those moments when war looked exciting and this attack would have made a good movie scene, but the movies are make believe and nobody dies. After play acting, the actors as well as all other working Americans back in the States, are able to go to their homes with all comforts and conveniences, or go out to eat, maybe have a drink or two, then go to a warm

dry bed, alone or with some one. These were the things we thought about and missed and for some of us would never be, the war wasn't over yet.

On another encounter, we were huddled in a wooded area preparing to move across an open snow covered field. It was a long distance with no cover of any kind. On the far side were trees, shrubs and the enemy. It was a situation when once committed, come what may, it would be foolhardy to stop.

Off we went, me with a radio on my back, the antenna waving, signaling for attention. There is no fast way to slog through snow. Being clearly visible we drew small arms fire immediately. At this time I heard the same sound that I heard during basic training while crawling on my belly through the obstacle course. The live rounds being fired overhead that close to one's ears sound like fire crackers popping. The only consolation, if any, is that it was individual rifle fire and not an automatic weapon. I kept moving like a rabbit, wandering, weaving, all the while thinking some one has my silhouette in his gun sight. Did a round have my name on it? One gets these thoughts. More slogging, more "pops." Halfway into the field more or less and the rifle fire ceased. Another close encounter. But just another day in the life of a front line soldier. I am tempted to ask again, why? Why not? How come? By now I have learned first hand there is no answer. Another 1,000 yards closer to the end of the trail. I hope so, my feet are hurting, but then so thankful to be able to feel the hurt and ever so grateful to have survived another day.

About this time, the end of January, after a month of fierce fighting the enemy was driven back whence he came from and the Battle of the Bulge was over at a staggering cost of lives on both sides. And again I survived and earned another battle star. I believe there was much more power protecting me than my guardian angel could muster. And I said, "Thanks for favors received."

The unit was pulled back and relieved from combat duty and spent about a week cleaning up, showering, shaving, getting clean clothing and for the first time in a month had hot meals. By now the cold was letting up, the snow became soft under foot and we were about to engage the enemy on his own soil. Little did we realize he was determined to fight fanatically, willing to die for the Fuhrer. The worst wasn't over, there was more war to be fought in Germany. But that's another country and another story.

Mission Accomplished

We were hauled by truck into Germany, the enemy's homeland for another on-slaught. The trucks could only get so close and of course we always had to walk the rest of the way. We converged in and around a little village, I think it was Bergstein, which was situated on an elevated rise where the land fell away in all directions then rose upward toward the east and the enemy. The situation was such that the enemy was able to fire an artillery shell like a rifle bullet and the shell could sail unobstructed through opposite and opposing windows, clear through a building without exploding. An artillery barrage quieted the enemy somewhat and so once again we moved forward, this time on the enemy's own turf. We no sooner began to move out when stretcher-bearers came heading toward me and the wounded man called out my name. He excitedly told me that a rifle bullet went clean through his thigh muscle inflicting no great injury and now relieving him from combat duty. He conveyed a feeling of gratitude that the enemy's bullet delivered the prospect of peace, comfort and security. Extensive combat duty influences one's perspectives. I had mixed emotions, should I express sympathy or congratulations? That was the last time I saw him. This war sure places limitations on one's friendships. Makes one wonder whose next. A long time ago a guy cautioned about this.

Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

John Donne

We were now in the Huertgen Forest, a vast forest of thick tall pine trees, traversed by narrow logging roads. Every likely path was heavily mined, laced with barbed wire and covered by machine gun bunkers. All these installations were prepared a long time ago as part of the Ziegfried Line. There were warning signs everywhere, "Minen." None of this daunted the General's plan to attack through the forest.

We hadn't gone far when mines and concertina wire halted the advance. The enemy was waiting for us and riddled the area with bullets and shells from every weapon at their disposal. It's easy for each man to seek the safest route and go his own way, becoming separated from the man on the right then the man on the left and disorganization soon follows.

The West Wall through the Huertgen proved impregnable. Our blessed Commanders realized this to be a suicidal mission and so we retreated, that is the survivors worked their way back to Bergstein. The Combat Engineers worked under fire for several days clearing mines and marking a safe passage. We launched the attack once again, but gaining ground beyond the mine fields wasn't any easier. The artillery, mortar and machine gun fire wouldn't quit. Losses were extremely heavy due to all causes, killed, wounded, captured and mental breakdown. You keep going, thinking that sooner or later, one way or another, it will all be over, and you don't really care which way comes sooner. Those of us that could, "carried on." When darkness settled in, the platoon sergeant handed me another radio telling me to stay put and keep both radios turned on. And so I spent the long lonely night cuddled with two radios. When it was over, less than a dozen survivors made up the entire compliment of F company. This blood letting on our part, called a diversion action by the Generals was successful, in that the armored units encountered little resistance as they rolled along the smooth, flat, dry pavement toward their objective.

I believe it was a miracle that any of us survived at all. This belief in miracles satisfied all my unanswered questions, confirmed my faith and put my mind at rest.

After the Allies crossed the Rhine River, the enemies organization started to fall apart and the mechanized units sped along whenever possible. There was little need for slow moving infantry and so the unit camped in reserve near the city of Worms, which is located on the west bank of the Rhine.

The city proper looked clean, orderly and unscathed by the ravages of war. Obviously the war was fought elsewhere, I could attest to that. I noticed some children playing in a school yard, evidently too young to understand what was happening in their country, much less the world. These German people were blond and blue-eyed. The other people I had met in Sicily, Italy, France, England, Belgium and Luxembourg all exhibited slightly different physical characteristics than I. They all looked different, like foreigners, however in reality I was the foreigner. My heritage is partially German and I was raised in a predominately German community and now paradoxically the people in the native land of the enemy look like ME!

The allied armored units were rolling through Germany, toward Berlin and southeasterly toward Austria. The organization of the enemy's fighting units was disintegrating. Rumors abounded that the enemy was surrendering by divisions. We all prayed for the end of hostilities, but were the rumors true? As welcome as the news was we were hesitant to believe. The more we wanted to believe the more skeptical we were. We didn't want to be disillusioned.

Near the end of April we received news by rumor again that all organized resistance had stopped. Isolated pockets of fanatics holding out but for all practical purposes the shooting was over.

These rumors evoked visions of: laying down our arms, shucking the army olive drab uniform, getting up out of the dirt, no more living in the mud, snow or cold, getting indoors out of the weather, a daily bath and shave, brushing one's teeth daily, a haircut, a wash basin with a hot water faucet, a mirror, clean clothes, regular warm meals, a mattress with clean sheets, a pin stripe suit, a pressed white shirt, a tie, wing tip shoes, a girlfriend, Mom, family and HOME!

Receiving the news by rumor, in bits and pieces not knowing if the rumors were true or not, there was no reaction to celebrate. Then on May 8 and 9 the armistice was signed. After all these years the war with Germany was over and yet this official confirmation didn't incite any desire to celebrate. I remember thoughts and emotions like: gratitude, reverent thanksgiving, somber reflections, serious meditation, aspirations, expectations, and happy tears, just like a Mother who cries at her daughters wedding. The news was too good to be true and I vowed if it was within my power then, henceforth, I would keep myself clean, shave every day and groom myself with care. I detested living unkempt, unshaven~~d~~, in the dirt.

Our services as a specialty unit were no longer needed. The 517th Combat Team was broken up and the Infantry Regiment packed up and headed for the Pacific. The long term replacement survivors, such as I and all the others that remained from the beginning of combat in Italy and in Southern France were eligible for discharge or occupation duty and were left behind. I was assigned to the 2986th reinforcement company. This was a newly organized unit set up to process the redeployment of the the lucky survivors being sent to the US of A. The Company was set up at a former French military post near Metz France. I had some typing in high school and remembered how to put paper in the machine and so was handed a typewriter in exchange for the radio and telephones. In short order the 2986th, began processing men to be sent home.

Our work day evolved into regular hours more or less and when off duty we could roam about at will. The Post barber was a French youth, that was several years older than I. He spoke English and so we struck up a friendship as we praised the virtues of our respective countries. On occasion I would spend week ends with him and the other members of his family. Like a home away from home. A meaningful conversation with the other family members was limited because of the language difference. However, smiles, nods and gestures seem to be universally understood. His Mother didn't have to talk, she was an excellent cook. We would walk together through the village and countryside exchanging our views about each other as individuals and about our different customs and governments. His dog would usually follow along at his side and once in a while he would pick up a stone, spit on it then throw the stone into a field of tall grass, maybe a foot or so high. The dog never failed to retrieve the stone. This dog feat impressed me and so remains in my mind.

You may wonder why I didn't rise in rank seeing as how battlefield promotions do come easy and I had plenty of that. The military has a way of exploiting the experienced survivors to lead the green troops into combat. Back in Southern France somewhere I was approached more than once and each time begged and pleaded that promotions were not for me. Money may be an incentive, but doesn't that make one a mercenary? The airborne rating doubled my private pay. In addition to that I received overseas pay plus extra pay for combat infantry duty. I was a private first class and with the additional ratings, my monthly stipend was equal to a commissioned officer state side. I wasn't doing this war stuff for the money. Non-coms were expected to be soldiers in every way shape and form. They were kept in line, under control, with the threat of forever being busted. I enjoyed freedom and independence, too much of a maverick to kowtow and besides I could screw-up in small ways without punishment except KP duty and that's when I usually ate better anyway. These were private reasons I kept to myself for not striving for a rise in rank.

I told the lieutenant that I was a draftee, a replacement, not a regular army man and was never one for seeking authority, control, dominance or lording over anyone. I didn't have the nerve to order others knowing that I possibly contributed to their . . . I just couldn't live with that. I told the Lieutenant I would be the missing link in the military chain of command. My precept was accepted and I wasn't bothered about promotions after that.

One day in August we received news about the atomic bomb and the subsequent surrender of Japan. Not knowing the magnitude of the destruction, we made judgements based on experience, knowledge and information at that point in time. The destruction, devastation and human suffering brought about by the war ended abruptly with the atom bomb. At the time it was regarded as good news and history shows that the atom bomb ended World War Two.

With the end of all hostilities it was our time to celebrate. Our time for revelry. Once in a while we'd go to the city of Luxembourg, which is the capitol city of the country with the same name. The city was big with modern conveniencies but looked medieval. Some buildings had spires, others turrets which made them look like castles. We would frequent dance halls with live music, live girls and consume fruit of the vine. I am happy to report I conducted myself with dignity, honor and restraint.

Life was a lot easier while at Metz. Our buddy from the motor pool was the chauffeur and provided transportation for a Sunday drive. We spent one day on the coast, the English Channel, near a city named Etretat. The city proper was situated on a cove and was ringed by high white cliffs. Several of us tromped round and about to the top and snapped several pictures.

Near the end of the year it was my turn to leave this foreign country. It was my turn to GO HOME! This too was accomplished in the military manner. Hurry up and wait. We were shipped somewhere to the northern coast of France and waited. About this time a fitting song for the occasion became very popular

and was the favorite drinking song at the beer garden. The song? Sentimental Journey played by Les Brown and his orchestra and sung by Doris Day. Doris is about ten months my senior but I show my age so much more than she does.

Somewhere in this time frame my dependable watch stopped running. I felt the watch was expensive, served me well and probably worth fixing. So I put it in my ditty bag and vowed to have it repaired when I returned to civilian life. More about the watch later.

I remember going to Liverpool, England then shipping out on a Victory Ship. The Victory was nothing more than a Liberty, just a different name in a different era. The ship departed Liverpool on November 9, charting a course across the north Atlantic bound for New York. The initial part of the voyage was relatively smooth. One pleasant day a group of us were sprawled on the fantail when we noticed a buddy peering intently at the pedestal mounted compass. We all had some schooling with the compass and understood words like azimuth and bearing. Our destination was known but not the actual compass heading. Someone shouted to the one peering, asking what direction the ship was going. With this request the peerer once again studied the compass. As he raised his head we anticipated a precise answer, expecting his training to manifest. We were disappointed when he extended his arm, pointed to the bow and said, "That way." How soon one can forget his military training.

Continuing our voyage westward to the new world the winds increased as they usually do this time of the year. The north Atlantic is notorious for storms when the calendar has only a few pages left. The wind and savage seas worsened with each hour. The ship was rolling and pitching so violently the galley was closed and everything that wasn't lashed was rolling about. I remember looking out the starboard port hole and seeing the edge of the deck skimming along dangerously close to the peaks of the turbulent swells. I estimated the ship was rolling over at about a 45 degree angle. But then I'm a poor estimator. Maybe it was only 40 degrees, or 35. Whatever the angle was, it sure looked scary. Beside rolling from side to side the ship was also pitching fore and aft. A huge wave would toss the bow heavenward burying the stern downward to the other place. Then when the bow would sink the stern would be tossed skyward and sometimes the propeller would rev up. As the stern settled and the prop grabbed the furious water the ship would vibrate and shudder. And all this rolling, pitching and shuddering was repeating over and over so violently that even the seasoned seamen were just as sick as us landlubbers. During this episode I had thoughts of an earlier voyage on a similar traverse by a ship named the Titanic.

In due time the winds slackened, the seas became a little friendlier and the ship continued westward toward the new world. On November 29th, after 20 days at sea, the ship entered New York harbor on calm seas with no scars of the storm. Then I saw it, there it was, bigger than life, with her arm raised upward holding a torch. I knew this was the land of the free and the home of the brave, because I was elsewhere and could compare. The US of A for a

bunch of reasons was number one. The towering height of the Statue of Liberty is impressive and inspiring, which tends to stimulate one's individual imagination of what this great country is all about. And on that day especially I was proud of my country, for what it stood for and for what the people believed in. I was proud to be an American.

As the ship glided to the dock a band began to play and a small crowd cheered. We appreciated the welcome. We were whisked to Camp Shanks, New York for a very short stay then boarded a train and steamed westward toward home. The train stopped within the confines of Fort Sheridan, Illinois and the mustering out process continued at full speed. We were urged to re-enlist or join the reserves. I wanted neither. I wanted no regimentation, no more yes-sir, or no-sir. I wanted what I fought for, freedom and independence, I wanted out.

I shunned any thought of joining any veterans organization. Maybe I didn't understand their aims or purposes. I didn't want to rehash, refight, relive, recreate images, or relive memories in a social atmosphere. I sought no recognition or special attention. I didn't want to be thought of as a hero. I didn't want my past life to interfere with my future life. I wanted to get on with living, in the manner I choose, with no ties or obligations to anyone.

I never did find out if the world was round. Only traveled part way. On a calm day at sea the world appears to be as flat as the fields of Kansas. The parts of the world I saw were awe inspiring and majestic. The fertile fields and barren waste lands, the mountains, alps and volcanos, the great rivers and all the varied terrain, topography, weather and climate, everything was beautiful in it's own way and I learned there is a little of everything right here in the U S of A.

Since leaving Liverpool things had happened fast, and I didn't comprehend how close to home I was. Then it dawned on me, I was a phone call away. "Hello Mom, I'm back, safe and well, see you soon."

To finish the story, I joined the work force, married the girl that faithfully waited and raised a family. As fairy tales usually read, I lived happily ever after.

Oh, about the watch. I took the watch to a reputable jeweler to be repaired and when I stopped to pick it up the jeweler said, "It was a piece of junk, not worth repairing." I was flabbergasted! The watch proved to be reliable and indestructable through thick and thin. More thicks than thins and he had the audacity to call it a piece of junk. I felt insulted as I stalked out and figured that everything he knew about watches would fit in my little finger. A piece of junk indeed! It didn't run but it still showed the correct time twice a day.

AMEN

P. S. My two older brothers, Arthur and Jerome are only mentioned in the beginning of the story. News clippings indicate Arthur was wounded and that the two of them did meet on one occasion. During this war stuff while we were making history happen, I was preoccupied trying to keep my name off the casualty list. At that time my entire world laid within my field of vision.

ADDENDUM

On page 37 I relate about a friend of mine, a fallen comrade, being carried from the field of battle. The words I used expressed the gist of my thoughts. At the time I wondered how many of us that were together in Sicily and later joined the 517th were still around. Like what were the odds against me?

After discharge I often thought I survived by beating the odds, never really knowing what the odds were. While attending my first reunion of the 517th which was held at Nashville, Tennessee in July 1989, I met several of my war time buddies and then later wrote to several of them. I asked John Rupczyk the same question, what he thought our odds were and he responded, "About 200 of us that were in Sicily joined the 517th and at wars end about 100 of us were left. We didn't do to bad." Using his estimate, for lack of something better, the odds were 50/50. I figured that those of us that survived, survived soley by the Grace of God.



HOWARD W RUPPEL

To you who answered the call of your country and served in its Armed Forces to bring about the total defeat of the enemy, I extend the heartfelt thanks of a grateful Nation. As one of the Nation's finest, you undertook the most severe task one can be called upon to perform. Because you demonstrated the fortitude, resourcefulness and calm judgment necessary to carry out that task, we now look to you for leadership and example in further exalting our country in peace.

Harry Truman

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