

# Call Me Burt

BY DICK WERNER | 01 JUN 1997 | PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

Three disheartened GIs entered the tattered house and asked for Lt. Hafkin. “He ain’t here.” someone sullenly replied and pointed to a back room. “Better get some shut eye. We’re on full alert.” There was a forlorn group of fellows seated around the table. No one even looked at us. As far as they were concerned, we didn’t exist. Our battle worn uniforms must have told them that we weren’t raw recruits. I felt as welcome as the black plague until I remembered how we in B company more or less ignored replacements. I understood their feelings, but it didn’t relieve the miserable feeling that was burning inside.

I followed the other two replacements into a vacant bedroom. They had been assigned to B company less than a week ago, only to find themselves shipped off to yet another company. I felt sorry for them, but they weren’t leaving their friends behind. As he threw his pack upon the floor, the tall thin one whispered, “What luck. This damn outfit makes B company seem friendly.” If I hadn’t felt so down in the dumps, I might have explained that front line soldiers were reluctant to make new friends, because every time a friend got killed, a part of you died with him.

Soon sleep overtook my weary mind and body. Sometime later I awoke to the sound of laughter. I opened the door and peered into the kitchen. By the sink a few fellows were busy cutting up vegetables. Another group sat around heckling the workers. What happened to the sullen group that ignored us? I looked around and realized they were one and the same.

By the looks of things the cook was not only making some sort of a stew, he was entertaining his buddies as well. He had to be responsible for their mood change. I listened as he told the ancient joke about a little boy going into a store and telling the grocer, in a thick Yiddish accent, “I vant fife cents pepper.”

The kindly grocer asked, “Do you want red or black pepper?”

“Nein.” replied the little boy, “I vant toilet pepper.”

Everyone laughed except me. I was half asleep, so unhappy and lonesome that I resented others being happy. Without realizing it, I blurted out, “What a lousy Jewish accent.” Dead silence followed. Everyone glared at me. If they had their rifles in hand, they looked like they’d have used them. I was so incensed at my own stupidity that instead of apologizing, I returned their disdainful scowls with interest.

To my bewilderment the joke-teller/cook smiled. His soft brown eyes seemed to say “I understand what you are going through.” His understanding look didn’t help, for it made me feel worse. “My accent may be lousy, but my nose makes it believable.” I did my best but couldn’t contain a half-hearted smile. He saw I was starting to wilt and he continued, “If you think my accents bad, just wait ’till you taste my cooking.”

I wanted to reply but couldn’t for I was too busy trying to keep from smiling. I guess self pity was hard to cure. Once the joke-teller/cook broke the ice, the rest of the men relaxed. If I wasn’t his enemy, I wasn’t theirs. His friendly attitude took me by surprise, and I didn’t know what to say or think and stood in the doorway looking like a lost soul. The cook’s soul-searching eyes seemed to read my thoughts. He probably felt sorry for me and tried to put me at ease by changing the subject. “Where you from, Red?” His

voice was so friendly that I couldn't understand why he bore me no malice. Even if I weren't under stress and thinking clearly, this would be difficult to comprehend. "I'm a replacement from B company. I have to report to Lt. Hafkin." I was hoping that he'd say that the lieutenant was at HQs. I was so unsettled that I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

He shook his head and smiled, "I know you're from B company. What part of the city are you from?"

"East 92nd St." I replied still looking for an excuse to leave.

He nodded his head, "It figures. You guys from Yorkville always pick on us poor Brooklyn boys." He put down the pot and walked toward me with a warm smile and an extended hand, "You've reported. Call me Burt." It sounded much better than Lt. Hafkin. As we shook hands he continued, "Glad to have you with us. B company's loss is our gain." His manner was so sincere and down to earth that despite not wanting to, I couldn't help being drawn to him. "You're Lt. Hafkin?" My voice must have cracked for everyone smiled as if to say, "Boy did we put one over on you." I shook my head and just looked at Burt for the first time. He stood a little under six feet, had broad shoulders and looked as strong as an ox. He walked as gracefully as he smiled, his nose was rather prominent and broad at the nostrils. This was his only noticeable imperfection, for his wavy hair, soft friendly eyes, and a modest smile which was buttressed by a strong chin made such a pleasant impression that he appeared to be almost handsome. What impressed me the most was that he was so at ease within himself that he made those around him feel at ease.

I regained a modicum of composure, introduced myself and added that my friends called me Red. Burt introduced me to the rest of the platoon. Including the replacements they numbered less than twenty. I imagined that although their casualties were high, Burt had managed to maintain his equilibrium and was probably responsible for the high morale of his men.

Burt certainly had done his best to make me feel at home, but for some unknown reason I still felt self-conscious and wanted to be alone. In this case misery didn't want company.

Coming into town I noticed a barnyard with a few chickens. "I've got two packs of cigarettes and a candy bar. Maybe I could trade them for a chicken."

"That's great." Replied Burt, "I make a wicked chicken stew. Want someone to go with you?"

"No thanks. Its down the street. I need some air."

I had my excuse and hastily took off for the door. "Thanks, Red," Burt waved, "If we ever get our tobacco and candy rations, we'll make it up to you."

"Its OK." I answered and darted out the door. When I reached the street, I realized that my rifle was upstairs. I rushed back.

"Forget something?" someone asked. "Yup, my rifle." If there was a crack in the floor, I could have crawled in. "I keep misplacing mine." Burt replied. I got the feeling that he knew about the rifle incident and didn't hold it against me.

I returned with a scrawny chicken and the belated impression that had I held out, the farmer would have thrown in a dozen eggs, for he eyed my cigarettes and candy bar like diamonds. Burt and his willing helpers killed and prepared the chicken. If he were as good a lieutenant as a cook, he'd be one hell of an officer. After supper Burt asked

us to clean up, for if the Belgian owners ever returned, he wanted them to find their house in order.

That night the platoon was assigned to outpost duty on the edge of town. When I returned after my shift, Burt was telling stories and doing his best to make his men forget the war. He was an accomplished story teller who enjoyed entertaining as much as we enjoyed listening. This night I remember him telling a Guy de Maupassant tale about a group of cadets at the St. Cyr Military Academy who idolized a performer at the Follies Bergere. It was common knowledge that for four hundred francs, the services of this lovely chanteuse could be obtained for a night of amour. Since four hundred francs was a vast sum in those days, the cadets decided to hold a lottery and sold four hundred – one franc chances. A diffident young cadet won and spent a heavenly night with the renowned beauty. As he was leaving, the shapely entrepreneur inquired how so young a person could afford such a prodigious sum of money. The cadet shyly told his story. The well endowed entertainer was so flattered that she declared that the fortunate young man would not have to pay for her services. Burt's timing was perfect. When he knew he had us, he remarked, "This comely young lady, clad in a sparkling gossamer negligee rushed into her bedroom took the four hundred francs from beneath her pillow ....." He stopped in mid-sentence, "Fellows, I've got to go to HQs. I'll finish when I get back." He wanted to get a rise out of us and he sure in hell did. Finally he condescended and yielded to our pleas. And continued, "She sashayed into the living room, gave the young man a burning kiss and handed the breathless cadet his money, a one franc note."

Just as the author intended, the ending took us by complete surprise. Burt enjoyed our disparaging remarks even though a few of the barbs were aimed at him. I'm sure Old Guy would have appreciated our comments — they were so choice that they may have been the basis of another story, or at least worthy of a paragraph or two in the epilogue.

#### THE WOLVES MASQUERADED AS SHEEP

Shortly after telling the story, Burt left. I thought he was going to spend the night at company headquarters, for they usually had the best billets and the company Jeep was reputed to be well stocked with goodies — the liquid variety included. To my surprise Burt wasn't heading for HQs, he was taking his turn on guard duty. What was the army coming to? Here was an officer who asked instead of giving orders, who cooked instead of being waited upon, who stood guard duty along with his men and really enjoyed their company. I couldn't help but wonder what he would do next. He was more like a big brother than an officer to the many teenagers in his platoon. No wonder his men admired him so much that his requests became orders. The next guard shift was doubled, and I lost two hours of precious sleep. Our four man post was located on the outskirts of town. We were in the open guarding an intersection. The weather was extremely cold and the wind showed us no mercy as it gusted and blanketed the streets and sidewalks with drifting snow. Suddenly the clouds drifted away and visibility increased and we became silhouetted like sparsely scattered trees in a meadow. It was too cold to lie on the ground to enable us to detect movement. Against our better judgment, we had to keep moving to avoid freezing. I couldn't help but wonder, "If I were an officer, would I choose to stand guard duty with my men or remain in a warm bed?"

Since a full alert had been declared, we knew that we were in a tight spot. We had been warned that Germans posing as Americans had been spotted in our area. Jerry was constantly trying to infiltrate our lines. The Krauts knew ten soldiers marauding behind the lines were worth at least fifty confronting the enemy head on. There were numerous reports of infiltrators destroying supply dumps, bridges and communication centers. Enemy infiltrators had, during the Battle of The Bulge, become a fact of life. Naturally, the rumor mill bristled with stories of Germans in American uniforms, walking or riding in captured vehicles through our lines and wreaking havoc. Our sentries were being fooled because the Germans spoke flawless English. During the Bulge, the Krauts became so brazen that daytime penetrations of our lines were not uncommon. The most widely circulated story was that over a hundred Germans dressed as Yanks were allowed to pass through our sentries into an American held town. Somehow the officer at the front of the column convinced the guards that their outfit had just been relieved, after spending over a week on the front lines. He told the sentries that they had lost their way in the dark and asked directions to the regimental HQs.

As the impersonators marched through the town, the Krauts who could speak English called to and joked with the infantry outfit that were stopped on both sides of the road to allow the incoming soldiers to pass through. As the story went, the German infiltrators were halted at an intersection to allow a convoy to pass. As luck would have it, during the stop, a Kraut bent down to tie his shoe. When the column moved forward, the soldier behind stumbled over him, they went ass over tea kettle, and cursed in German. The Americans blasted away, and the Krauts that weren't killed surrendered. Rumor had it that the American soldiers who lined the streets became suspicious because the masquerading Krauts were too frivolous, spoke perfect English, and never uttered a cuss word or slang expression. In the movies soldiers acted like this, but not battle weary GI's returning from the front.

Because of the threat of enemy penetration, the password system was drastically changed. Especially during the Battle of the Bulge, the front lines were in a constant state of flux. Outfits, by necessity, were continuously shifting positions without being able to notify HQs. Many units became lost or isolated, and stragglers were everywhere. The infiltrating Germans, for the most part, didn't know the passwords, but because of their command of English, they were able to convince our sentries that their regiment had another password, or that they had just escaped from behind enemy lines and didn't know the current password.

Army Intelligence countered by instructing all units to adopt a new SOP (Standard Order of Procedure) In addition to requiring a pass word, sentries were instructed to ask questions that only Americans would be able to answer. Intelligence probably decided that sports and comic book figures would most likely be unknown to well educated Germans who had spent sometime in the States and spoke fluent English. Questions such as, "Whose Popeye's girl friend?", "What is Sadie Hawkins Day?", and "Who's the Bambino?" were commonly asked.

If there was any doubt in the sentries mind, Geography was employed. Those on guard duty were instructed to ask, "Where are you from?" This led to a string of related questions. One of the most widely spread accounts told how a disguised Kraut said he came from Kentucky, the home of the Louisville Slugger. The alert sentry replied loud enough for the others to hear, "You came from Kentucky, Babe Ruth's home state."

“Ah sure do.” Replied the German. In a flash, he and his buddies were disarmed and in the hands of army interrogators.

This fear of infiltrating Jerries kept us alert, and, if anything, made our four hour stint seem much shorter. During our shift, two returning patrols passed through our check point, answered our hip questions, and helped break the monotony. The first patrol gave us an account of one hell of a tank battle with destroyed tanks everywhere.

German tanks were all over the place. Constant attacks and counter attacks made it impossible for them to determine the front or tell friend from foe.

The second patrol passed through about an hour later proudly prodding three disgruntled Krauts. One of the GI's commented as he left, “Now maybe they'll give us tomorrow off.” To which one of his buddies replied, “Hell, no! Tomorrow they'll expect six POW s.” This was typical GI humor. We weren't in the mood, but couldn't help laughing. Despite the cold, I felt warm inside. If I had taken the time to analyze the situation, the value of laughter would have been as obvious as a banged up thumb. Our relief arrived and we returned to our billet. The house was warm but my feet were so cold that sleep evaded me for hours. Sometime in midmorning we were ordered to move out. Upon leaving the village, we passed an artillery battery that was about to serenade Jerry. Since they were Long Toms, we figured that the front must be at least a few miles away. Shortly after the barrage began they spotted us. During a lull, we exchanged waves and shouts. Neither could hear the others comments because a nearby battery swung into action. If they could have heard us, they would have been insulted for our barbs were directed at their soft life. If given the opportunity, I think most of us would gladly have exchanged places with them, even if it meant learning to sing “The Caissons go Rolling Along”.

About ten minutes down the road, Jerry's artillery returned the compliment. We ran from the road and sought refuge in an open meadow, timed the descending whines, and hit the ground at the last possible second. We examined the terrain and realized that Jerry couldn't see us and was probably firing from map coordinates. During every lull, we ran away from the road. Someone commented, “It ain't fair. Our artillery shells 'em, and those Kraut bastards take it out on us.” Before anyone could comment, incoming shells sent us diving for cover. The ground was frozen solid and instead of being showered by loose dirt, exploding shells sent chunks of earth skyward until they eventually rained upon us so unlike the gentle rain. The familiar cry, “Medic! Medic!” rang out and I suddenly realized that it didn't have the same penetrating effect, for the victims were strangers, not friends.

These incoming 88's had a new and terrifying effect upon us, for the ground trembled along with us. It could have been the intensity of the shelling, or the thick layer of frost that was conducting the explosions in the same manner a pick sends shock waves through a cake of ice. Whatever the cause, the effect was nerve racking. Even distant explosions seemed nearby. This intense barrage lasted only a few minutes, and the fellow they called Chief commented, “Let's get the hell out of here, while Jerry is taking a coffee break.”

Someone replied, “If it were a schnapps break, I'd Join the SOBs.” This was followed by a chorus of “Right on's.” I soon learned that humor was an infantryman's tranquilizer, for a good laugh helped to ease the tensions that usually peaked during the calm that followed the storm. It was a pity that we didn't realize it at the time, and that so few of us were in a mood to crack jokes when they were needed the most. One

thing we knew for damn sure. If Jerry's artillery had our range and persisted, our staying power would have been severely tested.

As soon as the barrage ended, we moved away through the meadow into the woods. In avoiding the road we ran into an old friend turned foe, a fast running stream. We forded it and sloshed along in water soaked "goulashes".

It turned out to be a slow and tortuous walk. There were constant murmurs to the effect that we should have taken our chances on the road. Burt must have sensed our mood for he commented most casually, "It was most considerate of Adolph to send us his personal New Years greetings." When he was sure he had our attention he continued, "Maybe tonight he'll throw us a party."

No one replied and we lapsed into silence. I couldn't help thinking what a difference a year makes. This time last year, I was a civilian enjoying an afternoon party at Lord & Taylor's department store. Now instead of mistletoe, drinks and noise makers, we had fear, 88's, mortars, and Burp Guns.

Burt's voice again broke the silence, "If you don't like Adolph's party, rumor has it that Uncle Sam is providing us with a real New Years feast — turkey with all the trimmings." The terrain didn't improve but our spirits sure did. Burt must have realized that soldiers travel much better on a full stomach, or even the anticipation of one.

In the late afternoon we relieved one of the companies in our battalion. We almost felt sorry for these poor Joes for we knew how much they'd hate to miss Jerry's New Years Eve blast. In preparation for the party, we were ordered to set defensive positions on the edge of a woodlot that overlooked a rolling meadow and distant intersection. We enjoyed an extensive field of fire. If Jerry threw a party and invited his infantry, they were bound to catch hell unless they had tank and artillery support to keep us pinned down.

The sound of rumbling tanks in the distance alerted us to the need of antitank support. We heard roaring motors in the distance, but couldn't pinpoint their location or tell whether or not they were ours or theirs. At times it sounded like the tanks were in front of us. Other times the sounds seemed to come from our flanks, or even to our rear. Some of us said they were American. Other insisted that they were Tiger Tanks. We all agreed that the frozen meadow would be as good as a concrete road. With or without Jerry, the party was reaching a feverish pitch.

To add to the uncertainty and tension, artillery shells started whizzing overhead and exploding in the distance on what we hoped were our German counterparts. It looked as if we'd be ordered to advance as soon as the barrage ended. Now we were throwing the party and hoped Jerry appreciated our calling cards.

When the order came, we advanced as fast as our sodden feet could carry us. While crossing the meadow, we expected to be blasted by machine gun and artillery fire. This sure didn't slow down our pace. When we entered the woods, we expected to find machine gun nests behind every tree. Instead all we found were tripod impressions and tracks of a hastily retreating enemy.

What made Jerry run? He could have had a turkey shoot as we crossed the meadow. Burt explained that the Germans must have feared being flanked or they were setting us up. A few weeks ago we would have blindly pursued, or dug in and waited for orders from HQs. Now scouts were sent out to probe Jerry's position so we'd know whether to attack or set up defensive positions.

The scouts returned and the company officers consulted. We advanced a quarter of a mile before being ordered to dig in. Digging was akin to sweeping back the incoming tide with a broom. We soon gave up and realized that all we could do was watch, wait, and try to keep warm. Soon a battalion patrol passed through our ranks heading for enemy territory. We didn't envy them a lick. Probing the enemy lines under the cover of darkness was a risky business. Daylight only multiplied the danger.

It was hard to believe, but as I looked around there were few of our boys curled up sleeping, or at least acting like they were asleep. Considering our lack of sleeping gear and the sub freezing temperature, I thought only a polar bear could doze off.

Time hung heavy. Our so-called party was dull, at times tension broke the monotony, but nothing was able to relieve the penetrating cold. Our spirits were so dampened that I don't recall the customary exchange of even a heartless Happy New Year.

We were relieved shortly after dawn by a foggy eyed company from the Third Battalion. By the looks of them, they needed sleep as much as we did. Spurred on by the thought of a turkey dinner, we wished them luck and quickly departed.

We marched for about a half hour, passed through a small village and were overjoyed when we were billeted on a side street. Miraculously, the town, (probably Freux Menil) was untouched. The retreating Germans in September must have bypassed this town, and the Ardennes offensive must have been stopped just short of the village.

While passing through town, many a window popped open, and we were heartily greeted by bleary eyed Belgians. Their friendly waves, bilingual New Years greetings showed their appreciation. Once we settled in, we were assigned our post and road block duty. We were in Battalion reserve, but on full alert. We were told that the town commanded the roads that lead to Liege and St. Hubert. The Germans viewed Liege as the key to capturing Antwerp. If they captured this city, they would not only divide the Allied armies, deprive the Allies of a vital port but would seize precious ammunition dumps and oil supplies. On the other hand we had to take St. Hubert in order to relieve the besieged paratroopers at Bastogne.

RENE

Frank and I drew the first shift and were assigned to man a road block at a T in the road that ran parallel to the main drag. The side street that ended at the T connected to another street that eventually lead to the Liege road. A road block was needed to prevent anyone from skirting the main road. Because both roads twisted, we could not see the other road blocks, but were within hearing distance and could assist one another in case of an emergency. The fear of Germans infiltrating our lines hadn't diminished. We were instructed to question all strangers regardless of rank, until we were sure of their identity. Frank was from the midwest and would question anyone claiming to be from there. We agreed upon a set of comic book, sport and geographical questions, and hoped like hell we wouldn't have to use them. Our only visitors were Belgians who came with offerings of cookies and pieces of holiday stollen. We knew that they didn't have much and appreciated their sacrifice.

Since we didn't have anything with us to offer in return, we took very little and tried not to hurt their feelings, while at the same time expressing our gratitude. A woman from across the street, accompanied by her young son insisted that we accept cookies and hot chocolate. There was a shy expression upon her face as she chattered away in French, while her little son smiled at me with the hugest coal brown eyes imaginable. He was so bundled up that he reminded me of a large teddy bear that my sister had

dressed up in winter clothes and placed beside our newly made snowman. Now America and childhood seemed ages away. I was being besieged by those big brown eyes and an attack of homesickness. I hardly understood a word the mother said. The huge innocent eyes of her son, however, spoke a universal language and the gleam in them abounded with respect and admiration that is usually reserved for heroes and idols. As the mother was pointing to her house across the street and groping for words, an elderly man greeted us and spoke to her. By his tone we knew he offered his assistance.

The mother nodded her approval and he turned to us. His English was almost as precise as his dress. He explained that his neighbor was offering us the hospitality of her home. We asked him to thank her and explain that we couldn't leave our post. The little boy's eyes saddened as our words were translated. "Monsieur Rouge" was all I understood. The old man told us that Rene was very disappointed. We realized that he was responsible for his mother's wanting us to pay them a visit.

When he finished translating, the mother spoke at length. He then explained that Rene's mother along with the rest of the villagers wanted to show their gratitude to their American friends. As he spoke, the old man looked at us as affectionately as a doting father. "You are much too young to remember how Belgium suffered in the aftermath of the last war." We nodded and he continued. "Except for the relief efforts of Herbert Hoover and the generosity of the American people, we would have starved." While he spoke, the woman smiled in agreement, "Now your generation is risking their lives to save us. We feel a deep sense of remorse, because we owe so much and can do so little to repay our debt."

His sincerity left me speechless, and I hoped Frank could come up with an appropriate reply. He didn't speak. I gave it a try, "The kindness and friendship shown by your people will not be forgotten. There will always be a warm spot in my heart for Belgium." I meant it but wished that I could have recalled my words for they sounded so maudlin and made me feel awkward and unmanly. Sentimentality could be listed as another war casualty.

My words sounded much better in French. The next thing I knew the old gent and woman were hugging me. Then Rene jumped into my arms and hugged me for dear life. I felt embarrassed being hugged by strangers. I blushed and felt my face was becoming as red as my hair. Rene prattled into my ear. I turned hoping no one would notice my crimson face and that my ears would not give me away by becoming as red as Rudolph's nose. I put Rene down and he ran to Frank's outstretched arms. Again the old man insisted that we visit them. We explained that if we weren't ordered to the front, we'd love to. On parting we received another round of hugs. I enjoyed it and didn't blush.

The guards who relieved us said that chow was ready. "Hurry up or they'll be no hot cakes left." The cooks seemed to be an unfriendly group, but this didn't diminish my appetite a bit. After breakfast one of the fellows said he was going to attend mass. I was dog tired but decided to accompany him. Considering the size of the village, it was a large church, and the mass was well attended.

We arrived a few minutes late and stood at the back of the church waiting for the priest to finish the Kyrie Eleison. Men were seated on one side of the church and women the other. It struck me as odd that families didn't sit together.



The sermon was in French and I only understood a few words. Americans and Bosch were frequently mentioned and we presumed that the priest was telling the people how lucky they were that the Americans had stopped the Germans before they got to their village. He also mentioned Liege and Antwerp. We assumed he was discussing the Ardennes offensive.

After mass Rene grabbed my hand as I was leaving. He said a few words and tugged me in the direction of his house. I couldn't resist his smile and twinkling eyes and decided to accompany them home. A women friend of his mother thanked me and went on to say, "All Rene talks about is his friend, Monsieur Rouge." As we walked Rene held my hand and chattered nonstop. I wished his mother and her friend weren't lagging so far behind for I was most anxious to know what the little fellow was talking about. When we reached the house, I promised to return after a nap and asked the gist of the sermon. The friend replied, "The priest talked about the German offensive and asked us to pray for the Americans."

I waved good bye and added, "Au revoir" which was just about the extent of my French vocabulary. Again my arm was grabbed from behind. Rene tugged until I knelt. Then he gave me a big hug and a kiss topped off by an irresistible smile. I felt warm all over and thought, "Gee! but its great to feel human again."

When I returned to our billet, Burt was getting ready to go on guard duty. "Dick, here's your cigarette and candy ration plus a few more to make up for the chicken."

I thanked him and asked to be assigned to the same post. "Any particular reason?", he inquired with a know it all grin.

"I've a friend that I want to see again." I replied not thinking of the implications that could be drawn from my reply.

"A girl friend already. Now I know why you sacrificed sleep for church."

I smiled. You may not believe me, but the friend is a three to four year old boy." I went on to explain that he had taken to me as if I were his favorite baseball player. Burt started to leave, then turned, "Little children are instinctive devils. One look and a smile and he knew how you felt about him." Years of teaching school, raising six children and frolicking with grand children have proven the simple wisdom of Burt's remarks.

Somehow most children know if a grown up likes or dislikes them. The younger they are, the more likely they are to be guided by their radar like intuition.

I slept until awoken for guard duty. Some of the fellows had traded cigarettes for liquor and a party was in full swing. They were as loud as hell, but I didn't hear a sound. I was so tired that I probably could have slept through an earth quake.

The guards were glad to be relieved. It was understandable for the north wind made the sub freezing temperature seem much colder. The frozen slush on the streets and side walks made the limestone row houses seem unfriendly. It was so cold that we briskly walked our post. The people were scurrying on New Year visits. They waved to us but seemed too cold to stop and chat.

Every once in a while Rene would appear at one of the windows. He'd press his nose against the pane and wave. We waved and watched as his breath froze upon the glass, and he gradually disappeared behind a mask of frost, only to reappear at another window.

When we were relieved, Frank decided to return to our billet, and I told the sentries that I'd be in the house across the street. I knocked. Rene's mother opened the door, and he rushed to me. Without his winter clothing, he no longer looked like an overstuffed

teddy bear. Without his cap, his blond curls extended below his ears. His dark brown eyes shone and made his teeth seem whiter and skin seem even fairer. The sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of his nose blended perfectly with his impish smile and made the war seem like a bad dream.

I gave the four candy bars to the mother for Rene. She refused the cigarettes indicating she didn't smoke. In sign language and the help of the food on the table, I managed to explain that she could barter the cigarettes for food. She accepted and I recognized the French word for chocolate because of its similar pronunciation. Rene rushed to his mother's side and shrieked with delight. He took a candy bar, started to unwrap it, but was stopped by his mother. He looked at me, "Merci beaucoup, Monsieur Rouge." He gave me another big hug and offered to share his candy bar.

As he slowly consumed the chocolate bar, he was the picture of peace and contentment. He seemed to have no recollection of the past or concern for the future. His little world was here and now. I now realize that this was a perfect example of how nature protected the young and enabled them to survive all but the most adverse conditions.

While the youngster was eating, I gave his mother four D chocolate ration bars and somehow managed to explain that they could be used to make hot chocolate.

When the water boiled, she inserted a couple of sliced bars and made the drink. She added some cream, filled our cups and placed a freshly baked holiday stollen on the table. Everything was delicious; it was almost like being home.

We finished eating and she insisted upon using the remaining D bars to make hot chocolate for the sentries across the street. I delivered the drink and cake. The fellows were so grateful that I returned with two more D bars and three packs of cigarettes.

This was all they had with them, and they gave most graciously.

I came back and explained that I had to write to my mother and sister. Rene's mother lead me to the dining room table and indicated that she would build a fire in the parlor stove. I shook my head, sat down at the kitchen table and prepared to write. Rene was upon my lap in a flash looking at me with his mischievous eyes, while rubbing my stubble with his fingers and sputtering away as fast as a machine gun. His mother promptly took him away and probably explained that he was not to go near me until I finished.

My letter home described the kindness of the Belgian people and the hospitality of Rene's mother. As usual, I took special care to indicate that we were assigned to rear guard duty and there was still very little chance of our being sent into combat.

Every time my pen paused, there was a gentle tapping upon my knee. The little fellow with his pleading yet gleeful eyes would render a wistful, "Fini, Monsieur?" After a head shake he'd move away and like a faithful pet continue his vigil. After about the sixth or seventh tap an "Oui" followed and he climbed upon my lap and exploded a flood of what could only be questions. Neither my blank expression or "No compri" seemed not to deter him in the least. This type of hero worship was new but most gratifying.

With this affectionate child upon my lap, a strange transformation took place. The bitterness and war-inspired hate seemed to vanish, for I had experienced first hand what the war was all about. If my little friend and millions of children like him could grow up and lead normal lives, then our sacrifices would not have been in vain. I also experienced first hand that , "It is better to give than to receive." In return for my

meager gifts, I had received two of the most priceless gifts, the gifts of Friendship and Hope.

When I returned to our billet, the platoon was getting ready to go to chow. I had planned to shave and bathe in my helmet, but the thought of turkey had me rushing out the door. The meat and some of the vegetables were unidentifiable but appreciated none the less. I passed through the line, tried to strike up a conversation with the cooks in the hope of getting some leftovers for my Belgian friends. I was a stranger to the company and the friendly cooks sure in hell treated me as one. When I asked the mess sergeant for leftovers, he refused so gruffly that he must have thought that I was an enemy agent. Burt might have been able to help, but he was no where in sight. I ate alone and missed my friends in B company, especially the friendly and generous cooks.

After eating and cleaning up, I joined a group of fellows who were having a friendly conversation with Burt. I still remember listening to their account of the battle of wits and wills that took place in England between their buddy, Abner Goggin, and Lt. Soelburg, the company executive officer, who was determined that Abner would get his curly locks cut — or else. It was related with pride that after three trips to the barber shop, Ole Abner still looked like he hadn't had a haircut in months. In B company exaggeration was a popular form of humor. E company in this respect, wasn't any different. Burt didn't say much, except that he missed Abner. It was evident that he enjoyed seeing his men in so lighthearted a mood. Capping off the story one of the fellows remarked, "Abner and Soelburg got hit the same day. Wouldn't it be something if they wound up in adjoining hospital beds."

I looked at Burt and he shook his head as if to say that it didn't happen that way. One of the fellows chimed in, "If they're together, Ole Abner better not go to sleep, or he'll wake up with a head as bald and smooth as a baby's arse."

As soon as the conversation started to drag, I left and effortlessly drifted off to sleep. My nightmares were interrupted by the all too familiar, "Let's go. Guard duty." The night seemed colder and bleaker than ever. We were too cold to talk. Frank and I paced back and forth in a futile effort to keep warm. At this time we would have welcomed a returning patrol to get some news of the front and break the monotony. No one stirred and our two hour shift seemed like ten. What a cold miserable night. We were, however, thankful that we weren't at the front, but realized that we'd soon be there, and there would be no such thing as a two hour shift.

When we returned to our billet, we were happy to learn that Burt somehow had consolidated our posts and we now would have six hours off between shifts. Again I wished that Burt had been our B company platoon leader. If he had, things sure would have been different. You could talk to him. He would have listened to my side of the story and understood.

At 7 A.M. Frank and I relieved the guards at the road block. It was still cold and dark, but a fresh coat of powdery snow made the town seem brighter. When we were relieved, the early morning sun turned the snow to glistening crystal. The outlying hills sparkled and only the sound of artillery shells exploding in the distance brought us back to reality.

Frank returned to our billet, and I decided to write a few more letters. As soon as the door opened, Rene took me by the hand and rushed me through the hallway into the kitchen. Excitement shone in his eyes as he pointed to two candy bars on the table and

jabbered away. His mother pointed to the pot and in the direction of the soldiers across the street. By her motions I understood that the candy bars were given in appreciation of hot chocolate and cake.

I gave her a couple more D bars, and she offered to cook eggs for breakfast. It took awhile for me to get her to understand that a cup of chocolate and a piece of stollen was all I wanted. When I started writing, there was the familiar tapping on my knee, the wistful smile accompanied by, "Fini?", continued until I was finished.

Rene was upon my lap almost before my pen was pocketed. He rubbed his hand upon my clean shaven face and bewilderedly spoke to his mother. She answered, and with an imaginary razor went through the motions of shaving. Rene nodded, ran his fingers over my face and indicated that he understood. He then started examining tufts of my hair and talking to his mother. "Rouge" was the only word that I understood and got the impression that he had seen few, if any, red heads.

Suddenly the tot bounded from my lap and darted down the hallway into a bedroom. I thought he was going to show me one of his toys. Instead he returned with his parent's wedding picture. The look in his mother's eyes made me fear for the worst. I looked to her for an explanation. She closed her eyes indicating sleep. Then she pantomimed rifle butts and fists pounding upon their door. "Bosch!", she cried reenacting the horror of how they dragged her husband away. Throughout the vivid reenactment, Rene seemed puzzled. He was, thankfully, too young to understand.

I must admit that as a soldier, I wasn't too concerned about civilian suffering. The egocentric world of the teenager is not too far removed from that of a child's. Also, most of the destroyed houses, crumpled buildings, and dead cattle strewn about the fields like rubble after a football game belonged to Germans. We didn't feel sorry for the Germans. They started the damn war, wantonly destroyed or looted the conquered countries and enslaved the vanquished. Most of us felt that they got their just reward. I realized what Rene's mother must be going through. As we used to say in those days, she was a spunky lady, the salt of the earth. More than ever I regretted not being able to speak French, for they needed to be reassured that their family would soon be reunited, because the German offensive had been stopped and victory was within sight. I tried to convey these thoughts by sign language. In spite of my efforts, she still looked forlorn. Rene started talking to her. I tried to think of something to say or do but felt so helpless that I had to leave. Before leaving I told them I'd be back after my next shift.

As I was telling the guards that hot chocolate was on the way, the old gent joined us. I asked him about Rene's father and he explained that in early August the Bosch rounded up all able bodied men and carted them away. One of the villagers escaped and they learned that their captives were forced to work improving the fortifications of the Siegfried Line. Then it hit me. That is why there were no young men in church or around town.

The old gentleman seemed to wither before our eyes as he told the story. It appeared most likely that his loved ones were a part of this group. He didn't volunteer the information, and we lacked the courage to ask.

**VOLUNTEER? HELL, NO!**

After dinner a group of us were sitting around the kitchen table sipping wine and shooting the breeze. I still felt like a stranger, hardly said a word, but enjoyed listening to the accounts of Abner's prodigious appetite. I couldn't help picturing him as

weighing at least 250 pounds, extremely folksy, somewhat of a modern day character, right out of the annals of Dog Patch.

Our banter was interrupted by a loud knock. A company runner handed Burt a message. "What's up?" Burt stared at the message and took a while to reply, "Battalion wants me to pick a sergeant and nine men to scout enemy lines and relieve an outpost that is guarding some stupid bridge." Burt threw the message on the table and carried his glass to the sink. Under his breath he whispered, "I can't ask anyone to lead this damn patrol. I'll have to go."

I was coming from the sink and overheard him. His expression convinced me that the responsibility of command was getting him down. It would not have surprised me if he were wishing he was a private again. I picked up the message. Bridge, enemy territory, and advancing tanks caught my eye.

Burt looked so melancholy that he must have been thinking about previous patrols, for his entire demeanor seemed to say, "Why must I be the one to send them?" At twenty six Burt was as much of a big brother to his men as a platoon leader. Now I got a first-hand glimpse of how concerned and protective he was. I wondered how he was able to remain so calm under fire or be so cheerful and lighthearted enough to orchestrate the camaraderie that protected us from the flood waters of despair. I soon came to realize that Burt was a hero who died a thousand deaths not out of concern for his own life, but for the lives of his men.

As he walked to the table, I looked into his troubled eyes. "Burt, I'll go with you." I couldn't believe it. Those around the table also volunteered. Now he had to select those who would stay. Considering how tired we were and the danger involved, over nine men volunteering on the spot was a remarkable tribute. Burt didn't say anything, but his smile expressed his sense of relief and gratitude. "Get some sleep. We'll be leaving at 3 A.M." He stopped at the door, "I'm going to HQs to look at the maps and get a final briefing."

Before drifting off to sleep, I thought of Corporal Bryant asking a bunch of rookies in basic training, "Who wants to volunteer for the Air Corps?" The volunteers were promptly designated "dive bombers" and detailed to pick up all the cigarette butts in the area. This was the second time since basic that I volunteered. The first time was the night that the Krauts ambushed B company in the Saar. Both times I acted on the spur of the moment. I prayed that ignoring the Cardinal Rule, "Thou Shall Not Volunteer" would not prove disastrous.

Those of us going on the patrol slept in the room nearest the kitchen. All too soon the familiar shake and "Let's go" signaled the start of our mission. Reluctantly, we gathered our gear and left our warm secure billet. Burt led the way and nine sleepy, silent men followed.

We left town by a narrow twisting road, which in this rural section of the Ardennes was probably a main thoroughfare. It was January 3rd. We thought the road led through the Hais de Tillet Woods and eventually to the town of that name. St. Hubert was mentioned several times and we assumed that these towns were the key to liberating Bastogne.

Soon we were in the midst of a ominously dark forest. It was too damned quiet, and we feared that silence spelled danger. At intervals, we cautiously scouted both sides of the road, found nothing and continued toward the bridge. About a mile into the woods we were greeted by the group we came to relieve. Burt spoke to the sergeant in command

who quietly explained how the bridge was mined, showed us the detonator, and said that he was ordered to let the first tank pass over and then blow the bridge as the second was crossing. Burt told him we had the same orders. Burt followed the sergeant as he explained that the field telephone was connected to an artillery battery and the observer was expected around 7 A.M. The sergeant vanished in a flash, followed by his men.

“They didn’t waste a second,” remarked one of our men. “Do you blame them?” Burt replied, “This ain’t exactly a church picnic.”

The terrain to the left of the bridge was rugged and appeared much too steep for tanks, so only four men were assigned there. “Be on the lookout for a sneak attack.” The sergeant said that he heard movement coming from that direction. The remaining six men were spread out in pairs on the right hand side of the bridge. Burt took up the position by the detonator which was set up about a hundred feet from the bridge, within easy reach of the field phone, and picked me to be with him. I figured it was because I was the new kid on the block, and he wanted to keep an eye on me.

As I recall, it was a bitter cold morning. There was no moon, but the snow made it light enough to discern the outline of the field that sloped below us and the gorge that the stream followed to the left of the bridge. In the distance slightly to our right, we could barely discern the silhouette of what appeared to be a house. We were positioned at the edge of the woods, two men about every hundred yards. The incline leading to the meadow was steep enough to hamper an infantry charge, but tanks could advance over the frozen ground at will. The stream was only about fifteen feet wide, but it appeared that its banks were steep enough to prevent tanks from crossing. Now we realized why the bridge was so damned important.

Burt left to check the deployment on our side of the Bridge. When he returned, he told me that all was quiet and left to check the opposite side. I was again left alone with my thoughts. Lately there were times when my mind raced and times when it operated in slow motion. Now my thoughts gushed like an overflowing stream. “If this bridge is so damned important, why only ten men? Why no tank destroyers or at least antitank guns?” The next question made me even angrier, “Why send us without even a Bazooka?” Burt had explained that the Krauts usually sent a clinker to test the waters. That’s why we were to blow up the second one across. This made sense, but my spirits were still dampened by the questions that defied logic and couldn’t be answered.

Burt returned and whispered “I wish we didn’t have to spread the men so far apart, but we’ve got to make sure that we’re not attacked from the rear.” After listening he continued, “The snow will enable us to detect movement across the field, and the ice crust cracks underfoot, so no one should be able to sneak up through the woods.” I agreed and he continued, “I’d sure like to know where the front is. The sergeant didn’t know or have any idea what outfits were on our flanks, or even if there were any. The front was in such a state of flux, this came as no great surprise.

Time dragged. The ground was too cold to lie upon; we had to keep moving in place. The silence became more ominous and time seemed to stand still. Every hour or so, I was asked to check the men on our left. When I’d return, Burt would check the rest. In the intervals we talked. He told me that he planned to become a teacher after the war. He was tired of killing and felt that teaching would make up for it. I was also sick and tired of killing, hunting men and in turn being hunted. Burt’s desire to become a teacher was understandable, but I could not see myself as one. On the other hand, Burt would

be a natural. If he cared for his students as much as he cared for us, they couldn't help but like and respect him. I was sure that his mannerisms were bound to make him an excellent teacher. He was intelligent, asked, never ordered, and didn't enforce one set of rules and live by another. His students were bound to admire him so much that they'd be motivated to learn to please him.

In the course of the conversation, he jokingly mentioned Lt. Nichols, my old B company nemesis, "When Nick saw you going into the woods lugging that large cushion, he thought you had gone off your rocker." We both laughed as I explained that Nick never stood guard duty. "If he did, he'd know how important it was to be able to lie upon the ground."

"I wish we had cushions tonight." Replied Burt as we shifted from foot to foot in a vain attempt to warm our feet. "If the others are moving like us, it will be harder to see or hear Jerry." I agreed but we had no choice but to continue moving from side to side hoping that the trees in front of us would mask our movements.

In the distance we heard the sounds of artillery shells punishing the earth. The explosions were too far away for us to determine their point of origin or destination. We hoped they were ours and that we'd soon be going on the offensive again, for the waiting game was getting on our nerves.

Shortly after seven, we were joined by the artillery observer. Burt talked to him at length. "He doesn't know any more than we do. There are rumors that a regimental attack is scheduled for dawn." Daylight was well over an hour away. There was nothing we could do but wait and listen to the distant thunder of shells.

When daylight finally arrived, visibility was still limited by the patchy ground fog and mist. We could make out the stream more clearly, for it was only about a hundred yards from us. It disappeared in a blanket of fog as it meandered through the meadow about half way between us and the shrouded farm house on our far right. In a clear patch it reappeared and we could see that it curved away from the house and almost made a beeline for the bridge. In the sketchy light we were sure that the stream and hill would slow an infantry attack, but had doubts about the stream, because the banks nearest the house looked to be only a couple of feet high. From the farm house the fields extended for another hundred yards before ending at the woods. The woods we were in gave us cover. Our height and the meadows below us gave us an excellent field of fire. We knew that if Jerry attacked without armor, it would take a considerable force to dislodge us.

The steam drifting slowly skyward from the stream and the ground fog caused by the temperature inversion between the blanket of snow and the colder air created a white eerie mist that gave the meadow the appearance of a ghostly English moor.

Now and again the fog danced and slowly wandered in step with the intermittent breeze giving us a glimpse of the farm house and the surrounding terrain. We saw that the road from the bridge crossed another road that led to the farm house and then into the woods beyond. With the exception of the field below, the area around us was heavily wooded. The greenest rookie could easily recognize the importance of the bridge and the ground we occupied. If Jerry was going to attack with armor in the vanguard, this would be the only route in sight that his tanks could utilize. This explained the presence of the artillery observer, but not the lack of Tank Destroyers, anti tank guns, or much less Bazookas.

Visibility improved slightly and we turned our attention to the house that was only partly shrouded in the morning mist. It appeared to be a typical stone structure with an attached barn and a few small outbuildings, none was large enough to conceal a tank. Since there were no haystacks in sight, behind the house was the only place Jerry could conceal a tank. This gave us a sense of security for there didn't appear to be any place to hide one. If any approached, we'd hear them. Visibility was too poor for us to be certain how far the stone wall extended from the house. We were pretty sure that it enclosed the area around the barnyard.

Sometime before nine o'clock, the sun started playing peekaboo with the drifting clouds. Visibility was improving, but small objects were still hard to identify. "I got a hunch that Jerry spent a warm, pleasant night in the house enjoying schnapps while we froze our tails off." Before I could reply, Burt continued, "I'm going to borrow the observers glasses. I want to have a good look at that place." As he walked away, I noticed a BAR slung over his shoulder. By no means was this man a typical army officer.

Burt returned with the field glasses. We took turns surveying the farm house. Although the fog was thinning, our vision was still impaired. The house looked completely deserted and there were no signs of animals about the barnyard. When I gave the glasses back to Burt, he noted that he couldn't see any broken windows or signs of artillery or small arms damage. "I wish it were clear enough to tell if there were any tank tracks or footprints." He confirmed his suspicion of the house by adding, "As soon as we are reinforced, I'm going to have a look at that house." He handed me the glasses and I scanned the countryside. "Burt" I whispered, there's movement to our left. Looks like at least a squad of men are heading for the bridge." Whoever they were, they were in no hurry, for they were no sooner out of the woods then they stopped and seemed to be looking at a map — probably trying to figure out their location or destination.

"Are they Germans?", asked Burt as he removed the BAR from his shoulder.

"Could be. But I'm not sure. Its still too misty to be certain." I handed him the glasses and he observed the motionless figures.

"They're too far away. Damn the fog." He handed me the glasses, "I'm going to alert the observer and our men." Burt quickly spread the alarm and returned, "Well, what do you see?"

"They're helmeted with long coats and slung rifles."

"Now we know they're soldiers. But are they American or German?" I could only shrug my shoulders in doubt.

Burt nudged me as they started moving, and I handed him the glasses. They traveled 'till they reached the cross road and stopped and held another conference. It looked as if they were trying to decide which road to take. If they went ahead, they would go to the farm house. If they turned right, they'd be heading towards us and the bridge.

They finished talking and followed the road leading to the house. Burt signaled our men to remain under cover and to hold their fire until he gave the order. As they approached the edge of the barnyard Burt remarked, "Damn it, I'm still not sure. What do you think?"

"They've got to be GIs", I replied. "They are lost, and yet they walk down the road like they own it. They were in no hurry, even stopped to argue a few times." As proof positive, I stated, "Germans are professional soldiers, and would have used the woods



not an open road.” Then I emphatically added, “I’ll bet anything they’re Americans.” Little did I realize that I almost bet my life.

Although I didn’t hear it, a shot rang out, hit me and flung me about like a rag doll. I was knocked unconscious and rolled or slid about ten feet down the embankment, until stopped by the last tree on the hillside. I don’t know how long I was unconscious and never got around to asking Burt. I must have drifted in and out of consciousness. As my mind started to clear, I was convinced that I was dying. The events of my life didn’t rush before my eyes. All I can remember is that everything seemed so bright, a sparkling white. A blissful feeling of peace, contentment and resignation came over me. I was completely fearless as I thought, “If the Good Lord wants me, I’m ready.” In another moment of semi-consciousness, I also remember being thankful that neither wife nor children would be left to mourn. I must have drifted off again and remember hearing noises in the distance. In time they grew louder. It took a while before these noises registered as gun fire. I was still in a euphoric state, I vaguely remember smiling as I became aware that in addition to the rifle fire there were other strange but soothing noises. There were whizzing sounds, soft phuffs, light thumps and occasional whines and whir like echoes. They seemed so pleasant and I felt that I was peacefully drifting above the earth. Gradually my head started to clear and I realized that the blissful sounds were caused either by bullets flying overhead, breaking the ice crust, lodging in soft snow, or ricocheting off the tree that prevented me from sliding down the hill. A prolonged blast from Burt’s BAR almost brought me back to reality. I was still confused, but at least I was trying to figure out what I should do. As my thoughts became more lucid, the sound of incoming bullets convinced me that I was in the line of fire. “Cover your head,” my mind shrieked, “your red head against the snow stands out like a bull’s eye.” I opened my eyes and as soon as the ground stopped waving, I spotted my helmet about four feet from the crest of the hill. I made a lunge for it, but never made it because my arms and legs seemed to be made of rubber and wouldn’t obey my commands. I slipped backwards. Again the tree prevented me from sliding down the hill. The snow on my face and hands felt good. It had a warming effect, and I tried to figure this out. I must have started to drift off again for, “You’re alive!”, seemed to have come from miles away, as did the sound of incoming bullets.

The next thing I remember was the screeching sound of a BAR firing non stop. I looked up and wondered what Burt was doing there? He was picking me up. Why was he doing such a silly thing? I must have drifted off again, for I came to on top of the hill. Burt was reloading his rifle. He noticed eyes my were open, “By the way you went down, and the hole in your helmet, I’d have sworn you were a dead man.” He pointed to my helmet. It had landed upright with the back facing us. There was a jagged hole about an inch and a half in diameter that had been peeled outward like an orange. The bullet must have shattered as it penetrated the helmet, thus causing such a large hole as it exited through the rear.

I must have drifted off again, for the next thing I remember was Burt talking to the artillery observer and asking him to order a barrage.

“Cover your head” once more blasted through my mind, and sent me scrambling for my helmet. This time my arms and legs obeyed. I covered my head and spied my gloves beside my lucky tree. I slid down to them, and Jerry opened up as I clambered to safety.

“What the hell are you up to?” shouted Burt as he rushed to my side. “Can’t I leave you alone for a second?” I realized my stupidity, but it struck me as funny, and I burst out laughing. Burt didn’t want to, but he also laughed.

Incoming bullets soon ended our laughter. Burt and the other fellows returned their fire. I crawled over the precipice and retrieved my rifle. “Now What?” pierced my ears. “I told you to stay put.” I got the impression that he believed that I didn’t know where I was or what was going on.

The first time, I had to get my helmet and gloves. This time I went for my rifle. I couldn’t, for the life of me, understand why he was so upset.

“Are you with it?”, by his tone, I was convinced that he was certain that I wasn’t. This rankled me.

“I’m fine.” I stubbornly replied trying to ignore my throbbing head. My neck felt warm. I ran my fingers across it and realized that blood was trickling down from the wound. Burt saw my fingers and spoke harshly, “Damn it. Don’t you dare move until the stretcher gets here. That’s an order. Understand?” At the time I saw no reason for his getting all riled up and acting like a typical shave tail.

The fellows on our right started firing and someone yelled, “They’re trying to get to the woods.” Burt’s BAR immediately swung into action. For awhile I lay motionless placidly listening to the pleasant sounds around me. Then something strange inside me turned my apathy into anger.

“Those SOBS”, I yelled, “I’ll make them pay.” I grabbed my rifle and fired at a German running along the side of the wall. He flew through the air. I wasn’t sure that I hit him, or that he was just diving for cover. I waited like a cat, waiting for some bastard to move. The war again had become a personal vendetta.

We knew that it would be suicidal to charge across the meadow. “Let’s flank ’em.” Someone yelled and Burt replied, “Stay put. The damned bridge is more important than a few Krauts.” Every now and again, a German would dart to another position and draw heavy fire. It was a long stretch in the open from the stone wall to the woods. Wisely, Jerry remained content to hug the wall.

During a lull Burt again asked the artillery observer to call for support. He explained that it would just be a matter of time before their reinforcements arrived. He wanted our artillery zeroed in on the cross road and the house before Jerry had a chance to launch an attack. He also wanted Battalion to be notified that we were running low on ammo and need reinforcements.

Each side remained under cover and waited. Almost as suddenly as it started, the skirmish developed into a Mexican standoff, a waiting game, with both sides aware that the one who received reinforcements and armor or artillery support could easily dislodge the other.

When Burt returned, he asked me how I was doing. “Great. I’m just hoping a Kraut head pops up.”

“You look white as a ghost.” He crawled over, looked into my eyes, “I’m going to send you back with one of the men.” With that he waved his hand in front of my eyes. I realized he was right, but hated to admit it.

“I can walk back by myself. I don’t need any help and you need every man.” I was too proud to admit it, but my head felt like it was exploding. I was getting dizzy and nauseous. Reason prevailed and it was understandable that they needed ammunition

more than me. Someone on our right called for Burt. I left feeling as guilty as a deserter and vowed to return with ammo and reinforcements.

On my trek to HQs, my only companion was silence. Cold, clear, an ominous silence, a silence that penetrated my brain and portended an imminent attack. Every so often, I'd stop, rest and listen, only to be greeted by another wave of foreboding silence. I continued walking and something in the back of my mind was gnawing away at me. Then it hit me. I hadn't even thanked Burt for risking his life to save mine.

Postscript:

This small skirmish was the start of the bloody battle of the Hais de Tillet Woods that ended with the capture of the town on Jan 12th. Delmer "Abner" Goggin returned to the outfit the day I left, Jan. 3rd. Forty four years later, I met him, for the first time since the end of the war. He described this battle as being as hard fought as any in the Saar. According to him, Burt was the only officer left and was the acting company commander. When they captured their sector of the town, there were less than a dozen men in the company. The first sergeant told Abner that Lt. Hafkin had been recommended for the Silver Star, and the rest of them for Bronze Stars. Lady Luck again smiled upon me. I wasn't with E company in the Saar, when they suffered heavy losses, and I left before the real fighting in the Ardennes began.

Incidentally, Burt never received the Silver Star and his men never received their Bronze Stars. It looms as a distinct possibility that Burt's unpopularity with Battalion brass may have been the determining factor.

LADY LUCK VISITED ME AGAIN

As I neared the town, the silence was broken by the pleasant sounds of trucks and jeeps moving about. Not far from our billet, the first sergeant was talking to one of our men. I told him how badly Burt's patrol needed ammunition and reinforcements. "I'll get word to Battalion." He returned in a flash, "What happened to you?" He just noticed the dried blood upon my face.

"I got grazed by a bullet, but I'm OK." He looked closer.

"Better let the medics check you over." He offered to send someone with me. I refused and he pointed to the aid station at the far end of the block. When I got to the aid station, the building was empty. The soldiers at the intersection road block told me that the aid station had been moved to a safer location. They pointed to the left fork of the road and told me to follow it.

Like most roads in this section of the Ardennes, it was narrow, twisting and soon became engulfed in a dense forest. After a few minutes, I started to feel queasy and stopped to rest. Soon afterward a jeep approached, I hailed the driver, but he stepped on the gas and sped away. I should have used my rifle to stop him. I recognized the driver, although I didn't know his name. He was a First Battalion sergeant. I remembered seeing him talking to Major Chapman the morning after B company had been attacked in the woods. I was as angry as a hornet, and probably didn't realize how lucky I was to be able to jump aside in time.

I had to rest and probably drifted off again, for it felt like some time had elapsed before I resumed my trek. I vaguely remember something that sounded like artillery rumbling in the distance, hoped we were shelling the farm house. As my head cleared uncertainty crept in — "was the shelling a reality, or wishful thinking?"

About three quarters of a mile down the road, at a hairpin turn, I spied the jeep that almost ran me down. It was racked up in a small ditch. There were tank tracks that

seemed to indicate that both vehicles rounded the bend at the same time. The jeep driver must have swerved left in an unsuccessful effort to avoid the tank. The passenger side was completely crushed, the windshield was broken and the driver's side was a bloody mess. The tracks indicated that the tank had turned around and headed in the direction of the aid station, hopefully with the unfortunate jeep driver on board. If I were a cat, I'd be running out of lives.

The sight of the blood turned my stomach, but I didn't stop to rest until the bloody scene was well behind. I said a prayer and thanked Lady Luck because I believed she was sent by the One above.

#### WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DOCTOR MAKES

As I approached the aid station, an ambulance sped by. I hoped it was taking the injured jeep driver to a hospital. I imagined that I'd be treated by the doctor who told me there was nothing wrong with my feet, at most a slight touch of arthritis. I was infuriated because he intimated that it was all in my head. I hoped against hope that this doctor would ask me how I felt, for my prepared reply was, "I'm hurt, but there's as you'd say, nothing to worry about, because it's all in my head." This brought my feet to mind. I imagined he might be right, for they felt so good that I'd forgotten all about them. This made me decide to dispense with wise cracks.

Once inside, a medic took me to an examination room, and gave me a tetanus shot in the upper thigh. The pain was so intense that I almost fainted. The medic smiled, one of those, "it hurts me more than it does you smiles."

"What the hell are trying to do'?" I shouted.

He shrugged, "Orders, anyone who gets hit, gets a shot."

"Why the hell didn't you inject me in the arm?" He smiled as he left the room. That damn shot hurt more than the bullet, and I was angry enough to clobber him. In a while I managed to cool down by convincing myself that he was only doing his job, even if he enjoyed jabbing more than he should have. Even after I cooled down, I couldn't understand why my temper almost raged out of control.

A warm friendly smile on Dr. Salpeter's face helped me to forget my anger. He greeted me with a casual, "Sorry that the shot hurt so much, but we can't take any chances. Believe me an infection would be a lot more painful than the shot." He gently examined the wound, "How did this happen?" I told him about the patrol, how Burt rescued me, and that I forgot to thank him. He never took his eyes off mine, "I'm sure that under the circumstances Lt. Hafkin will understand." While he was saying this, he kept shining a small light in one eye then the other. Next came a series of non-sensible questions, such as, today's date, my birthday, and simple multiplication problems.

It finally dawned on me that he was checking to see if I was with it. I got a kick out of it and couldn't resist a sardonic, "When you're finished playing school. I'd like to play monopoly."

He tried to appear serious and in a most professional tone replied, "OK. I'm satisfied. School is over. Now it's time for fun and games." With a broad smile he wielded a pair of scissors, "Remember bald is beautiful." He then amputated the hair around the wound. "Now comes the fun part." He wielded the razor like a sword, "This should hurt you more than me. If it doesn't, let me know and I'll shave the rest of your head." He gently shaved the cut area and applied an antiseptic.

He looked as if he were anticipating a snide reply. I tried not to let him down. "If you were a dentist, you'd have your patients howling and 'PAINLESS', would be all that

you'd need on your shingle." I think this convinced him that I was in full command of my senses. My sanity probably remained in doubt.

As he reached for a roll of gauze, he spied my helmet and picked it up, "I don't believe it, by all rights the bullet should have gone through your head." He then pointed to the entry hole, the size of a bullet and continued, "The angle of entry should have resulted in skull penetration. I can't for the life of me understand how it came out without going through your skull." He turned the helmet over looked inside and nodded his head in the manner of a detective who had just discovered a vital clue. "Look at the socks and toilet paper stuffed under the straps of the helmet liner." He showed it to me and I realized it was not my helmet, for I was wearing my extra pair of socks and had run out of paper. I mentioned this and added that it was dark when we left our billet. If he had said that I had more luck than brains, I couldn't have disagreed.

"It is quite possible that the socks and tissue deflected the bullet that is why you only have a razor like incision along the side of your head. If you stop using your head, in no time, you'll be as good as new." I thanked him grabbed my helmet and started for the door. Where do you think you're going?"

"To rejoin my outfit." I replied, "They're low on ammo, and I want to make sure it's on the way."

He asked why I was so anxious to return. I told him that the way things were going, Battalion may have ignored the first sergeant's message.

"Don't worry he will not let them forget." He pointed to a chair in the waiting room, "I'm sending you back. You must be x-rayed, and there is a slight chance you may go into shock. In any event, I'm recommending ten days of observation and rest." In spite of his jovial manner, I knew he meant business and knew what was best.

While waiting for the ambulance, Dr. Salpeter sat next to me. There weren't any patients so he had time to spare. We had a long talk. Since we both lived on Long Island, he remarked that we're almost neighbors. He took a real interest in me. The last time I saw an army doctor, he made me feel like a number, and the more numbers like me that were between him and the front, the safer he would be. Dr. Salpeter even made it a point to ask me to see him when I got back. He had a way about him that made me feel more like a friend than a patient.

When the ambulance arrived Dr. Salpeter and the corpsmen wished me good luck. As the ambulance was leaving one of the medics called to the driver to stop and opened the door. "The Doc figured you might want Your helmet as a souvenir." He handed me the helmet and a wool cap, "Doc thinks you should keep your head warm."

The ambulance contained two sets of double deck stretchers. I got in the top bunk so that I could see out the windshield. As we passed the damaged jeep, it struck me that I had forgotten to ask about the driver. "See the jeep in the ditch. Did you take the driver to the hospital? It looks like he hit a tank and was really banged up." The driver stopped and looked at the jeep. "I just got back from an Evac Hospital. He was probably taken to a Paris hospital. If he's in real bad shape, he might have been taken to an airport to be flown to England." From what I saw, the chances were that the unfortunate driver would be on his way to England, or the morgue.

"Where are we heading? I'd love to spend a couple of weeks in England."

"You and me both. I've been to Paris, and I'll take England anytime." He must have realized that he didn't answer my question, for he added, "You're headed for an Evac Hospital. You'll probably stay there until you're ready to rejoin your outfit."

I wanted to sleep but my mind kept going over the past events. My grandmother used to say, "Dick me bye, you have the Luck of the Irish." Today had proven her to be right on target. It was, pure, or at least dumb luck, that I picked up the wrong helmet, was swaying to the right instead of the left when the bullet struck, and that the last tree upon the hillside twice prevented me from sliding to the bottom. Further thought convinced me that it was fortunate that Burt picked me to stay with him. What else but Lady Luck being on my side could explain my being nicked by the first shot fired and missed by the hundreds that followed. I felt sorry for the jeep driver, but it was sure lucky for me that he didn't give me a lift. I prayed that luck wasn't an expendable commodity, for if it was, mine was pretty damn well used up.

As we sped through the open country side, a farm house caught my eye, and my mind flashed back to the events of the morning. Burt was right; there were Germans in the farmhouse. The shot must have come from either the house or from behind the barnyard wall, for when the first shot hit me, the unidentified soldiers were still walking on the road — at least a hundred feet from the stone wall.