

A Baby on a Battlefield

by Captain Walter L. Wakefield

During Operation Market Garden in the Netherlands in September 1944 I was S-2 of the Second Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel Otho Holmes. Once the city of Nijmegen and the bridge had been taken, the battalion was sent back to guard the DZ. Our front line there was a north-south road beyond which was a wide expanse of fields leading to a farmhouse surrounded by trees, called Den Heuvel, occupied by the Germans. From the front line a tree-lined lane lead back to the battalion CP near a large farmhouse that served as an aid station.

On the night of October 2 the Germans attacked with a fairly large force and a number of armed vehicles. They were beaten back in a matter of hours and at first light I was sent with a squad to dig out a number of the attackers who had broken through and, unable to get back, were hiding in ditches and under piles of hay. We rounded up about twenty as I recall.

Then appeared at the top of the hill near the aid station a little group of civilians -- father, mother, at least one small daughter, and a baby in the mother's arms. They had been living in a house along the road that was our front line when we arrived and were allowed to stay there because the mother was about to have another baby. It was born just a day or two before the attack, during which they hid in the cellar. Now they were being escorted out to a refugee center.

All looked frightened and miserable, having only the clothes they were wearing. As we waited for the truck that would carry them to safety, I picked up an overcoat from a pile of them discarded by wounded in the aid station. I tried to put it over the woman's shoulders but she turned, handed me the baby, and put the overcoat on her husband. For a minute I stood there holding a baby on a battlefield.

Years later with a friend who could handle the language, I visited the area again. We went out to Den Heuvel from which the German attack had been launched to find there the family that had lived there during the German, American, and Canadian occupations. Then we went up to Voxhill to the farm that had been the aid station. There too we found an elderly man who had stayed on all during the war, living in the cellar. Asked if he remembered the family, he replied that indeed he did, The Von Bebbber. Did he remember the baby? Oh, yes. Did it live? Yes. The mother died but the rest of them were living in Groesbeek, a town a few miles away. To Groesbeek we promptly went. We found the father but the others were not at home. The baby, now a six-foot bricklayer was out courting so we didn't see him. However, at the Christmas following I had a very nice letter from the daughter of the family together with pictures of them all.

So I have these souvenirs of one happy moment during the war.