

Bois de Limors to Hill 131 Normandy, France July 3, 1944

By D. Zane Schlemmer

July 3, 1944 was quite a memorable day in my life even though it happened more than a half century ago; I can still remember the minor details of that day as if it were yesterday.

The night before the dawn of July 3, 1944, in Bois de Limors¹, was dark, cold and rainy and everything was damp or wet. Somehow, the cooks did get hot coffee up to us but it was the only warmth there. Our jumpsuits were gas impregnated, which helped keep the rain out, but any and all rain that got in also stayed inside our clothes. Being airborne, we had no transportation, so we had to carry everything we needed for fighting our way up Hill 131.

We all knew the importance of capturing Hill 131 -- the highest hill in that part of Normandy. We could not see Hill 131 because of the low hanging rain clouds. These clouds also meant that we would not have the promised air support for our attack, but it also meant that if we could not see the hill, neither could the Germans up there see us down below!

At dawn, our supporting artillery and mortars started pounding the German line and rear areas. Since we had to start the advance attack through the defense line of our 1st Battalion, there were not enough foxholes for protection at the starting edge of Bois de Limors, and the German counter-artillery and mortars started shelling us. That day was not a good one for me nor for Private Paul Winger of "E" Company, who was from my little hometown, and his wife worked with my father. The German counter barrage killed him that morning (not far from me), so I was troubled about how I was going to address his death, for she was a very nice girl.

I was up front with the attacking company commanders so that if close support mortar fire was needed, we could radio to the mortar positions to request it, then adjust it.

We, NCOs and Officers, each had a white sheet of paper map showing the hedgerows, orchards, fields, roads, the few farms and houses (obviously reproduced from aerial photographs) so that we could plan our advance, but it did not contain any elevations. As we advanced, the paper got wetter, dirtier, and more unreadable. It was very important to have this map; however, because our supporting artillery had a similar map and would tell us via radio the number of shells that they would fire into the hedgerow in front of us. We would then count the shells landing and immediately rush that hedgerow before the Germans could recover, and the artillery would lift their fire to the next hedgerow. It was the only way that an attack could be successful in that "Bocage" country.

Shortly after the attack started out of the Bois de Limors, off to my left, I saw our Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Tom Shanley, who was up front with the troopers, go thru a hedgerow opening, hit a booby trap tripwire, and was wounded by the explosion. Then, as we advanced thru the various fields and orchards, I saw a movement to my left rear. I turned and saw two young Germans running and jumping into a foxhole. I fired two shots in their direction and called, in German, three times to "come out with your hands up," but there was no response from them. So I took out one of my thermite grenades, which burns very hot, and bowled it into their foxhole and continued my advance. I'm certain that they could not have survived the thermite grenade.

We then came to a country road and crossed a small stream. There the Germans had

¹ The Bois de Limors is an area near Etienville and Pont l'Abbe in Normandy, France.

downed and mined several trees across the road, as a roadblock. We radioed this information back so that an armored bulldozer could clear it for the follow-up armor to advance up the hill behind us.

Both our 2nd and 3rd Battalions spearheaded the attack up the hill, with the 1st Battalion mopping up behind us. Sometime later, my good friend, Lieutenant Rex Combs of "A" Company, 1st Battalion, came across a hedgerow, which he climbed up on and discovered a field full of armed Germans hiding there. Single handily he sprayed the field with two clips of his Thompson submachine gun, then took the remaining living Germans prisoner -- 42 of them! Rex was awarded the Silver Star medal for this action.

The rain lessened but it was very wet and muddy in the fields, which seemed to be endless hedgerow. I do not recall seeing any houses during our advance attack, though the map showed several. Such was the hedgerow country.

In one field, I was flattened under intense German machine gun fire which kept hitting some cow manure several inches from my face, which I was pleased that the bullets were not hitting me. The cow manure kept splattering all over me and there was nothing I could do to move but just lay there and take it with hope against hope the gunner would not adjust his fire.

Advancing up toward the woods on the top of Hill 131, we waited for the artillery to pound the next hedgerow with six rounds. Then the five of us rushed it. It was then that the timing went wrong -- for instead of raising the artillery fire to the next hedgerow, our artillery repeated and pounded us. One shell tore the front of the sole of my jump boot off and blew me into the hedgerow. The second shell then wounded me in the left arm and knocked me down again. All five of us were wounded in this barrage and the calls for "medic" rang out.

Thus my first wound of World War II, but fortunately, not life threatening and in my arm. My wound bled a great deal but did not hurt as much as it was a numbing, aching feeling. It came as both a shock and surprise for I never thought it would happen to me but rather to the others. The medics finally got to me after the more seriously wounded were cared for. I then had to find a radioman to get a forward observer up to take my place in the advance.

I finally came to the roadway which ran up the side of the Hill 131 near the border of the woods. There I found a row of trees that had been very expertly prepared with explosive demolition charges to drop them over the road but our advance had been too fast for the Germans to blow them down.

By then, my arm was starting to ache and pain, so I made my way down to the front of a house in a hamlet called "l'Auvrairie," where one of my mortar sections was moving forward and I gave my replacement my binoculars, map, and other needed equipment. While I sat there, someone took my picture with my wounded arm and I had a morphine syringe between my lips heating it up for injection in my arm for the pain.

I made my way back down the hill and found a cattle shed near "la Bocagerie", being used as a Medical Aid Station. This was the first Norman building that I entered during my stay there -- for we were instructed to stay out of all buildings, thus knowing that soldiers in any building would be German. By this time, it was late afternoon and from the excitement of the attack, the lack of sleep the prior night, the shock of having been wounded, the loss of blood, the effect of the morphine, and the drain of adrenaline, I felt indescribably weary. Being "walking wounded," I helped load several seriously wounded stretcher cases into an ambulance and then thru the rain, rode the ambulance back to Utah Beach.

I was overwhelmed by the number of ships, boats, vehicles and supplies and activities back there on the beach. There at a Field Evacuation Hospital they took all of my armament, helmet and equipment leaving me only my clothes, boots, and personal items, and fed me some hot "C" ration food.

That night, I walked out to a beached LST (landing ship tank) which had been converted to a Hospital Ship to evacuate the wounded to England. My dirty, bloody, wet, stinky clothes and underwear which I had worn since June 5, 1944 was cut off of me. I was then allowed to take a hot shower. What incredible luxury!!!

I was shocked to see how white my body had become in these twenty-eight days. When I saw myself in a mirror, I was again shocked. My hair was long, I had grown much older than I was (19 years) and my eyes had that hollow, hunted and haunted look that only front line combat produces.

I was then operated on to clean out and close the wound while the ship sailed on to England. My one demand was that my jump boots, as beat up as they were, had better be where I could see them when I came to after the operation. They were! After twenty-seven days in the Normandy hedgerows, pajamas, a bed with pillow, sheets and blanket, the great Navy food, juices, fresh bread, and ice cream were almost unbelievable to me. A truly different world!!! So ended July 3, 1944 for me.

I had to remain in the hospital while my arm wound healed. I heard a rumor that another airborne operation was in planning, so on August 27, 1944, I talked my way out of the hospital -- mainly by threatening to take off anyway and rejoined my Platoon for "Operation Market Garden" in Holland on September 17, 1944, where I jumped with my arm still bandaged.

Our 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment had jumped into Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944, with 2,056 troopers. Only 918 returned to our base camp in England on their return July 13, 1944 -- the rest being killed, wounded, or captured; however, many of the wounded, such as I, did return at later times.