

Christmas Memories

By D. Zane Schlemmer

December 24, 1944, Christmas Eve, came clear and freezing over the forested ridges of the Belgian Ardennes, the site of the "Battle of the Bulge." There were thousands of Christmas trees and heavy snow, but the parallel of Christmas ended there. The only sounds were the crunching of the icy snow under the paratrooper boots and the putt-putt of the German V-1 buzz bombs overhead on their pilot-less flights to Liege or Antwerp far to the rear. The scene was in total black and white -- the whiteness of the snowy fields in stark contrast to the darkness of the forests and the line column of troopers struggling under the weight of their total possessions.

We had been the tip of an eight-mile long thumb extended into the throat of the German onslaught. We had pushed into the area to provide an escape route for the weary and beleaguered American troops who had delayed and denied the German Army the use of the important road junction of St. Vith for five long days. The paratroopers had now been ordered to withdraw. We were unhappy with the order for we had paid in blood to hold open the escape corridor and would surely again pay in blood to eventually regain this ridge. This thought, combined with the airborne doctrine of "never relinquish ground gained" made it difficult for us to think of withdrawal. To a man, we were certain that by the next day, Christmas Day, there would come an assault from any of the four German divisions identified, to our front. With these thoughts, we struggled on our route march to a ridgeline seven miles to our rear, where our "not one step further" line should be established.

Precisely at midnight on Christmas Eve, came the unmistakable distant sound of artillery batteries. Each trooper immediately became elated with the thought that American artillery was providing cover for this withdrawal. It was only when the shells descended and burst among us that the reality of incoming German artillery fire became evident. Again, to a man, the silent columns quickened their pace to a running gait despite their heavy equipment loads. As the march continued, sounds of distant diesel engines could be heard, indicating the movement of enemy armored vehicles following our path. Thus again prodded, the rapid pace continued to the new positions.

On December 25, 1944, Christmas Day, dawn came gray and with low-hanging clouds over the trees at our new positions and the task of "digging in" was well under way. The rocky, frozen root-bound soil was feverishly grubbed. Weary and worn, alternately sweating and freezing, we continued to dig and camouflage our holes, set up our weapons, stash backup supplies of ammunition and place antitank mines, before the anticipated attack which would surely come. Snow began to fall masking our line, and our canteens of water froze solid. Each of us, when finished, sought the shelter of our foxholes for the warmth and protection afforded. There had been little time until now to think of past Christmases, of families or loved ones, of gifts or mail, for there had been none since we had been in battle.

Darkness came early that Christmas Day in the Ardennes and the outposts reported in that a large concentration of German Panzer Grenadiers, supported by halftracks, was approaching our line. Thus alerted, each trooper silently readied for the onslaught. Out of the night, through the falling snow, came the German columns trudging in their heavy coats, rifles slung over their shoulders, some talking, some smoking, all completely oblivious to the paratroopers dug in mere yards away. The wait for the signal to open fire seemed endless. When it came, the firefight was both intense and devastating. The falling snow mercifully covered the remains of the two German battalions that, in that short time, ceased to exist. As we retrieved the usable enemy weapons, ammunition and

equipment from the fallen ambushed column, we discovered a large wicker basket which had been carried on a pole between two German soldiers. To our amazement, we found that it contained butter. Then, as if on cue, an American supply patrol from the rear found us and dropped off two food containers -- one full of ice-cold coffee, the other full of roast turkey, solidly frozen. Our Christmas feast had arrived! Using the captured butter to heat the turkey and with the coffee over small fires at the bottom of our foxholes, we savored that feast. No finer Christmas dinner has ever been relished more than that simple meal, for then we knew that we had not been forgotten there on a snowbound ridge in the Belgian forests.

Each Christmas Day since that day so long ago in 1944, I silently pause to reflect and remember that tragic Christmas Day in the cold and lonely forest of the Ardennes and to give thanks for the joy and peace of each succeeding Christmas.