

NORBERT STUDELSKA'S STORIES

Third Platoon, D Company
508 Parachute Infantry Regiment

OCTOBER 1, 1944

(PIR = Parachute Infantry Regiment)
(ETI = European Theater Of Operations)

A NORMAL EVENING BEFORE ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE--

For the Third Platoon of D company, 508 P.I.R., the evening of October 1, 1944 started as most evenings did for front line infantry soldiers stationed in the E.T.O. or any other field of operations during World War II, or any other war for that matter. Some troopers were in their holes reading new and old mail. Some were standing around chewing the fat about any and all subjects. Some were exchanging kidding remarks and some were doing nothing in particular. I was a member of Bob Lenell's 60mm mortar squad, which was dug-in, with the rest of the platoon, along a country road near the small village of Kamp in Holland.

Two weeks earlier, on a bright Sunday afternoon, the regiment parachuted in the same general area. Flat and green covered land spread over the area to our front, with the border of Germany and the Reichswald Forest a little more than a mile distant. From previous experience, especially the loss of our second platoon, soon after the jump on September 17, the troopers were alertly aware that Kraut soldiers were out there some place. As the light faded, the troopers were getting ready for their rounds of sleep, guard duty, or outpost duty at a farm site about one hundred yards to our front.

THE THIRD PLATOON SECTOR--

I well recall the Third Platoon's defensive sector. Earlier, on September 20, the platoon suffered its first KIA casualties along the same road when a Kraut eighty-eight zeroed in on our bazooka team. Bennie Upton and Charles Tuttle received a direct hit to their foxhole. Our squad was dug-in near a sturdy farm house along the road. My foxhole was about ten yards to the left of the house. The mortar and a good supply of ammo was dug in a few yards back behind a farm out-building. A machine gun was dug in to the right of the house, which Lt. Sickler used as his platoon C.P. A thick hedge along our side of the road offered excellent cover. Because of the flatness of the terrain to our front, we had an ideal view and field of fire.

On a clear day, any enemy movement could be observed. The rest of the platoon was securely dug in along the road. I always thought that it was incongruous that one of our smallest troopers, Abe Oybkan, was our B.A.R. man, carrying one of the heavier weapons. Bob Lenell and Jody Parsons manned the 60 mm mortar. A few weeks later, in an orchard near Bommel, they suffered a tree burst above their hole during one of the Kraut's protracted and ponderous barrages directed

at that reserve area. Jody Parsons was killed and Bob Lenell was seriously wounded. The act of removing them from the hole will live with me forever. I have been in contact with Bob Lenell for the past three years; he still carries the pain and physical inconvenience of his wounds.

A BEAUTIFUL FOXHOLE--

My foxhole was a model of comfort and protection. Because we had abundant time to make front line life as civilized as possible, I took great pride in making my home the best on the block. It was chest deep, long enough to lie flat when I slept, and narrow at the top. I recall angling it into the roots of the hedge. To keep things neat and clean, as my good mother taught me, I completely lined it with the canopy of a main chute. I had a built-in shelf for my personal gear and a picture of my childhood sweetheart, Elaine Olson, whom I married after the war. Never again during my combat days did I have the time or inclination to duplicate that hole. I hope to visit that spot some day if I can find it.

THE ATTACK--

After dark, the Kraut attack started rather nonchalantly with what seemed like enemy patrol action. This put us on the alert and before long, all hell seemed to engulf us. A combination of artillery bursts, Kraut flares, machine gun tracers, our own and enemy mortar shelling created a nightmare of insane fireworks. At the same time I was struck by the calm matter of fact soldier tasks that were taking place around me.

Forms of the enemy to our front were clearly visible during the many flare and shell bursts. Squads of determined enemy seemed to swarm the field like spectators coming to a sporting event; for some, the price of admission would be their lives. One of their targets in our immediate area was the relentless machine gun posted to the right of the house. From my vantage point, I could see the enemy alternately running and hitting the ground. Some were so close that it was impossible to miss our shots. Some were tossing potato mashers, some had rifles and some were firing burp guns.

For a moment, I felt guilty because I thought I hit a medic attending to a downed comrade. Although I had a full belt of M1 ammunition, plus an extra bandoleer. I recall fearing the consequences of what would happen if we ran out of ammo. With the intensity of the attack, that seemed within the realm of reason. The prospects of our position being over-run seemed imminent. I recall the many thumping sounds of our mortar blasting away at unknown targets that happened to be in its field of fire.

Well, into the action, Lt. Sickler called out to tell two of us to join him behind the farm house because the Krauts broke through and were now behind us. I reluctantly left the safety of my deluxe foxhole to join Lt. Sickler and another trooper by the name of Perkins, a member of our mortar squad. About that time, tanks were clunking up the road to our left. I remember Frank

Haddy excitedly heading in the direction of the tanks with a bazooka. A little later, we were treated to another display of spectacular fireworks from the turret of the lead tank. Frank Haddy and Luis Arellano scored with the bazooka.

Lt. Sickler, Perkins, and I were on the ground observing the Kraut forms to our rear. A grouping of three or four were huddled less than 50 yards from us. I had one grenade left and suggested that I let them have it, but Lt. Sickler told us to let them get closer.

HOLD AT ALL COSTS--

In the midst of the confusion of being surrounded, a lone form staggered toward us calling out names of troopers in our platoon. He fell about 20 yards from Lt. Sickler's position. We dashed out to help him. It was George Thorne, our platoon runner who made it from the company C.P., several hundred yards back, through the enemy, which had broken through. The ordeal cost him a bullet hole through the stomach. His message from the company Commander was , "Hold at all costs." George had done his duty. We carried him to the basement of the farmhouse, where he was cared for by our medic. At the time, George's message from the company headquarters seemed ironic. Since we were surrounded, there was little else to do but continue to hold out.

George Thorne was one of my good buddies. We took jump training together at Benning in April and May of 1944, crossed over on the George Washington troop ship, and joined the 508th as replacements, after the D-Day troopers returned to Nottingham. This was the last I saw or heard of George. I am still hunting his home state of West Virginia, seeking information about him, with no success.

THE ATTACK FIZZLES--

After what seemed like two hours of intense fire fighting, the Kraut attack waned to a few intermittent shots followed by a new wave of artillery. The Krauts to our rear seemed to disappear into the night. Lt. Sickler told Perkins and me to go back to our holes while he checked out the rest of the platoon.

THE BARRAGE--

The barrage that followed the failed attack was one of the most terrifying that I experienced in Holland or the bulge action. The earth literally trembled and the sound of the in-coming artillery and screaming meemies humbled all on the receiving end. The pounding lasted for an eternity and every shell sounded as if it would hit my hole. An absurdity of battle would be to live through an all out attack and then die from a force over which the soldier has no defense other than to lie in a hole and sweat it out. To me, the barrage was the most frightening part of the entire night. My rosary was well used that night.

THE NEXT MORNING--

The early light of morning revealed the heinous carnage of battle. The smell of a still smoldering tank, the dead and dying enemy, the moans of the wounded. One wounded enemy stood up and staggered away into the misty morning, ignoring our offers to help. Through the early morning fog, we could detect three or four German half-tracks moving around to our front, probably picking up wounded or dead. Dead enemy were to our rear. Some that broke through were victims of their own artillery barrage. A few unguarded and dazed prisoners milled about the farmyard, probably grateful because, for them, the war was over. One of the troopers asked an English speaking prisoner about the outcome of the war. He replied that the Allies had the most airplanes, guns and soldiers, but Germany still had Hitler.

UNDER THE HAYSTACK FAST ASLEEP--

Later in the morning, three of us, Bill McClure, Baker (had a first name but nobody knew it), and I volunteered to go back to the company C.P. for rations. We headed for the C.P. via a path at the edge of a field. We passed dead Krauts and our own mines that were rather randomly placed in the field. We walked past a lone haystack and seemed to notice some movement of the hay next to the ground. Recalling earlier rabbit hunting days in southern Minnesota, I dismissed the moving hay as rabbits nesting.

On the way back to our lines, we passed the same haystack. This time one of us gave the side of the haystack a good jump boot kick. Well, the rabbits turned out to be two of Hitler's invincible SS men who appeared ready to go home to their mothers. In broken English, the one that wore a medic's armband declared, "So we are American prisoners." A burp gun and Mauser rifle were also buried under the hay. Needless to say, they helped carry the rations back to the platoon. In 1989, I attended my first reunion with the 508th in Portland, Oregon. Bill McClure and I had fun talking about the haystack incident and wished that Baker would have been there to share that memory, which vividly sticks in my mind.

LOOKING BACK--

After the jump in Holland on September 17, 1944, our platoon was shelled, strafed, and shot at by snipers. It wasn't until the action of the October attack that I could really say I was a combat veteran. I have always considered it a privilege to have had the opportunity to serve with the other troopers of the 508th.

ADDITIONAL EPISODES OF NORBERT STUDELSKA'S EXPERIENCES with the 508th in Holland.. '44. Reprinted from: History of the 508th in WWII. "Die teufel sind Gelanded"... in English... "THE DEVILS HAVE LANDED", by Lewis Milkovics and retold here with permission of the author.

“THREE UNEVENTFUL EVENTS” by Norbert Studelska, Grafton, Wis. 508th Regimental reunion war stories, which seem to get better with age, often center on folksy and insignificant personal experiences that had little or nothing to do with running a war. To make that point, I offer three of many such events that have remained imprinted on my mind since the war years.

DIRECT HIT--

During the Holland campaign, on a morning in October of 1944, D-Co. took over defensive positions near the village of Bemmel. The third platoon's mortar squad consisting of Baker, McGrath, Perkins and me (earlier we had lost our squad leader, Bob Lenell who was wounded, and Jody Parsons who was KIA), set up positions and dug in near a wooded farm area that was devastated from previous shell fire. After our holes were prepared, we selected a nearby chicken coop as our headquarters to store our gear, brew coffee over C2 from Gammon grenades and to get in and out of the frequent fall rains. We spent most of the quiet day cleaning the place out and transforming it into our HOLIDAY INN.

We were proud of our achievement and looked forward to the comforts of our new home away from home. Apparently in our zeal for cleanliness and comfort we drew attention from a Kraut mortar observer because just about the time we were ready to settle in, the enemy zeroed in on our new home and with a direct hit blew it all to hell. So much for the comforts of Holland.

LEAVING HOLLAND--

After a little less than two months in Holland, the regiment was on its way to garrison duty at Camp Sissonne in France. The first leg of the trip was a twenty or so mile trek by foot because of the shortage of truck transports. During this march we passed English troops moving in the opposite direction toward the front. One smart alec English soldier made a remark about our reason for leaving by asking, “Is it too rough up there for you Yanks?” Our machine gunner, Hayden, replied that we were moving back, “to set up roadblocks to keep you God damn Limies from retreating.”

After that we finished the trip to Sissonne in the back of top heavy English lorries. As we were moving across the French countryside gazing out the back of the canvas enclosed trucks, the lorry directly behind us flipped over on its side while making a sharp curve. We didn't think much about it until after we learned that our buddy, Chen, received a broken neck and died during the accident.

We all thought it was ironic for a good soldier to die in that manner after surviving so many days in active combat. D-Co. lost a good one.

UNUSUAL CONFRONTATION WITH THE ENEMY--

In January of 1945, D-Co. was advancing through the snow covered forest somewhere in the Ardennes. Because of the heavy snow and dense evergreen cover, it was impossible to see anything clearly in any direction beyond twenty feet. We know there was enemy patrol action in the area because of sporadic small arms fire. During a short stop, I used the opportunity to relieve my bladder on the snow covered ground. About half way through my personal duty, I noticed movement in the thicket and before I knew it a white clad Kraut was facing me. The confrontation was over in seconds. He could have let me have it with his burp gun, but he turned and disappeared among the trees. My buddies told me the reason the Kraut took off was because he didn't want an American trooper to urinate on him. Later in the day about twenty Krauts gave up in the same area. I think I recognized one as my old friend.

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