



Heroes Among Us

Jim Edwards was born in Shickshinny, Pennsylvania, and as a boy, “often wondered what it was like for soldiers during WWI.” Forty years after the end of WWII, and at the urging of his grandson, Jim wrote of the horrific experiences he encountered during his seven months on the front lines. He filled almost 20 pages with his war experiences and was able to witness and enjoy the pleasure little Jamie had reading his grandfather’s story. Shortly thereafter, the boy was diagnosed with leukemia and died a few months later.

This article is written in tribute to a very brave little boy. His grandfather, a real American hero, reluctantly wrote of his war time experiences, and in doing so, captured the true essence of war for all to read, feel and, hopefully, remember. Jim’s story also brings attention to the thousands of young Americans who served their country when called to duty. Most were unsung heroes who lived and died; many never given an opportunity to tell their stories and receive proper recognition.

The curiosity of my Grandson about World War II is the reason for writing about my experiences as an infantry soldier in France. For many years I found it difficult to talk about war, but writing for him was the one way of satisfying his desire to know. The experiences in the story are but a few of many that covered six months during the Winter of 1944 and 1945... later known as "The Battle of the Bulge."

Unfortunately, the orphan regiments of Task Force Linden were not given any credit for their heroic stands at Hatten and Rittershofen. Two battalions of the 242nd Inf. Regt., 42nd Div. held off the 21st Panzer and 25th Panzer Grenadiers for three days, sustaining 60% casualties. The 232nd Infantry manned 33 miles of front, holding off the German 7th Parachute and 10th Panzer divisions for 12 days. And the 222nd Infantry stopped the counteroffensive below Haguenau at Ohlungen Forest, Jan. 24-26, 1945. All told, Task Force Linden suffered 1,483 casualties during January.

When I was a young boy, I often wondered what it was like for a soldier in World War I. On each holiday, there was at least one soldier marching in the parade, and I admired them for their bravery and what part they must have taken in battle. I wished I had known some of the experiences they had, but I never did, so for the younger generation, I have decided, after more than forty years, to write of some of my own experiences of World War II. I believe there are some who wonder, but feel uneasy about asking what it was like. Some of the experiences I have written about in the following pages, hurt almost as much now as when they took place. No words or pictures can describe the feeling of combat nor can it be erased from the mind. To be hungry, thirsty, cold and exhausted, facing death each day during the winter; from an enemy with superior fire power, for what seemed like an eternity; can not be fully understood by anyone other than an infantry soldier.

Nov. 1944 - March 1945

The landing in southern France was quiet and easy with no combat activity. As we climbed the hills from shore, it was obvious the Navy must have saturated the land with artillery before we came in. There were depressions all over and many unexploded shells protruding out of the ground. I had wished many times later in the war for some of that kind of support. For the next few days we took it easy as the units regrouped. Each night we built small wood fires to keep warm and each night a plane would come over and we had to hurry and put out the fire, thinking it may be the enemy. After hitting the road again for some miles we came on a railroad track and located a small freight train. This was my first trip in a 40 and 8. A box car big enough to hold forty men or eight horses, and by the looks of the floor the horses gave them more business. They must have used it since World War I from the looks of the build-up on the floor. At the time I was the Ammo man with a small mortar squad, but a change to rifleman came with our first encounter with the enemy when food, water and ammo couldn't get there. After what seemed like a short train ride, we unloaded and headed out on foot. We were soon to reach a city on the Rhine River. We circled and came North looking across at the enemy concrete pill boxes on the other side scattered all along the river. The word was that we were to cross in amphibian trucks that were meant for land or water that some other unit had brought in. It never materialized, and we were lucky because the enemy would have cut us to pieces out on the water.

One evening we were invited into a home by a little girl, I judge to be ten years old, to warm ourselves. She said if we would talk real slow, she could understand English, she had learned in school. Her Mother couldn't understand at all so the kid did the translating. She told how the enemy had forced her Daddy to leave and was in the enemy labor camp and would we bring him back. I sure felt sorry for the kid. We gave our food rations to them and left as the kid dived into a chocolate ration bar. I said we'd get her Daddy back before long and not to worry. I had to give

the kid some encouragement. Leaving the home after an hour or so we walked around the river bank just keeping on the move to keep our feet from freezing. One of the guys stepped on a trip wire sending a flare up in the air. Automatically we received machine gun fire from a pill box on the enemy side of the river. We hit the ground and soon the firing stopped. They couldn't see us in the dark, but fired in the direction the flare came from. Morning came as we regrouped and picked up more rations, heading from town, thankful for not having attempted a crossing against such odds. After several miles we could hear artillery exploding, but we felt safe, believing the enemy had not gotten our range or didn't know exactly where we were. It didn't take too long for them to change our mind. We spread out on each sides of the dirt road as the first artillery shell exploded some distance ahead of us. It was the first encounter with the enemy, but we had experienced many types of explosions during training and so were not too excited. The word was passed to discard our backpacks that contained our personal articles, raincoat, and food rations, this was a mistake we found out later. We kept walking in the direction of the shelling and were surprised by men of another division on the run past us, toward the rear. We found out later they were holding until we came and weren't stopping to greet us. Now the enemy must have spotted us. The enemy tanks we couldn't see began to shell, we fell to the ground and I saw one of our men still standing in a half crouch, shocked by the situation. I yelled at him to get down, again I yelled as hard as I could, thought I might have to run over and knock him down, but finally he fell. First they were exploding in front of us then in back. When the shells went over our head it was the sound you would hear if you shook a large paper bag for two or three seconds and then the ripping exploding. When the firing eased off we made a run for the position vacated by the other unit and again we had tank and mortar fire on us. Now I knew why the other outfit was in such a hurry to get out. We jumped into partly dug foxholes and sweat it out, there was nothing we could do against hidden tanks and artillery pieces, while all we had were rifles; I wondered how the men behind me on the way up, came through the shelling, but dismissed the thought when more shells exploded around my position. The concussion hurt your body all over as the dirt and snow hurled over my head, soon the enemy eased up, and we expected an infantry attack but it never materialized. If they knew how little we had to fight. Evening came with more snow and bitter cold, and not having eaten all day; I was wishing for anything at all to eat, but nothing came. The days ration was in our backpack that we were ordered to discard. Now the enemy shells only came in at certain intervals, just enough to keep us down. As it grew dark, we were each to keep alert on two hour shifts as the others tried to sleep. My guard duty came as fog set in along the canal and it was freezing. When I rubbed my nose; my nostrils seemed to freeze shut. It was so cold the tree limbs would snap, and I'd bring my rifle up in the direction, expecting the enemy to come out of the fog.

When my two hours were up, another group would take over guard duty while we slept. When your exhausted it's not hard to sleep sitting up on your knees with your head in a steel helmet against the side of a foxhole. Morning came with a wakeup call of more shelling from the enemy. We were like ducks on a lake for them. We couldn't move and we couldn't fight back. This went on into the next day and the next. I wondered of what value we were in this position, shouldn't we move either into the woods toward the enemy, at least find some cover or get out. My canteen bottle on my hip was frozen solid. I hammered it on the frozen ground to break the ice since it was of no value to me. The snow I ate seemed to make me more thirsty than ever. You can suffer without food but water is a must. They couldn't supply us with food or water because each time a truck came up it received shelling and had to get out. One time during a lull, a guy in a hole next to me said he was going to try a run for the canal, I said if you make it I'll try, well he made it but was driven back by enemy fire. After a few more hands full of snow I decided I had to have some water from the canal that was frozen over. I made a run and made it over the canal bank and began breaking through the ice to water. I worked as fast as I could and filled my bottle adding a couple of purifying tablets, shook it and drank without waiting for them to dissolve. I looked across and saw a few legs frozen in the water of which side I didn't know. The trip back to the foxhole was fast, diving head first in, at least I had water. Finally one night the food ration truck got through. A few at a time crawled on our stomach about a hundred yards to a wooded

area where the truck was. Those that made it first were given oatmeal which froze before they could eat it all, and the pan was left for the next guy. When I made it to the truck the oatmeal was flopped on top of the frozen but it was like Thanksgiving dinner, I was so hungry, and back to the hole before it became light. The following night boxed rations were received so we were good for another day or two. I found a can of water proofing shoe wax under the snow that the previous land owner had left. I put it down by my feet and lit it to warm my feet that were almost frozen. It didn't help much but I could warm my hands. Nights on guard duty the trigger finger would go numb from the cold.

Conversation was done by hand signal or in a whisper at all times, but this particular evening at dusk we heard the rumble of tanks and were thinking the Germans were headed our way. It turned out that some other American tank unit had come to help us. Everyone was so glad even some were clapping their hands as they past . In a few minutes all hell broke loose, flashes of tank fire and explosions shook the ground, flames from burning rubber inside tanks looked like bonfires in the night. Soon disappointment took over, this American unit made up of small tanks was no match for the large German tanks and those that survived were returning in high gear to our rear and again we were on our own. Before long we too withdrew to a small town about a mile to our rear. I thought how great it was to be out of the foxhole and be able to stand up and walk and eat even if it was dog biscuits, but it didn't last long . An officer picked me and three others for a dirty detail. We were told that a bridge across the canal had to be blown up. We were to go through enemy tank positions to do it. I said the son of a B_____ knows we can 't make it, its suicide, but they don't care. If the tank unit couldn't get through, how in the hell can the four of us. We were heading along the last building with only rifles waiting for the call to go . All of us knew our chances were zero of getting through. At the last minute the orders were canceled and no one was more relieved than me. I recall that our platoon seemed smaller and wondered where they might be, but I didn't want to think what may have happened. Thinking back I recalled two soldiers left us one night and returned the next day. The suffering was too great but word had it they would be given fifty years at hard labor. We talked among ourselves how lucky they were, at least they would be alive.

The next day I was fingered again. This time the officer selected me and another guy. We were to be sent by jeep to our last position that we withdrew from and blow the bridge over the canal. The bridge was already planted with explosives, we were told and the plunger was in a foxhole nearby. We were to wait at the bridge until we could see the enemy advancing toward us. I ask how we were to get out. He shrugged his shoulders and walked away. Soon a jeep pulled up and the two of us climbed in and headed out of town. The driver drove like hell until about a hundred yards from the bridge when the enemy must have spotted us and opened up with artillery and rifle fire. We jumped out of the jeep and headed for the fox hole as the driver spun around heading back for town like the devil was after him and here we were trapped again. What happed during this encounter I don't know, but the bridge was destroyed and we made a run between the canal and the road to take advantage of trees and brush for cover from the artillery shells that shook the ground under our feet. The exploding shells seemed to follow the road all the way back to town. Who was the officer that sent me out there; I hated his guts more than the enemy that was trying to kill me, after all I thought he was trying to do the same thing. What made me mad was the bridge wasn't big enough for anything bigger than a wheel barrow and troops could walk across the frozen ice! As I came out of the woods facing town, I had a couple of hundred yards that had no cover and we began crawling on our belly as the shells were exploding around us. Then there was a hard thump about twelve feet from my left. I looked over to see a large artillery shell that didn't explode. It lay there so hot the snow was melting and hissing around it. I set a record for crawling on my belly to get away from it thinking it was a delayed action shell. I had to thank some person in enemy slave labor for sabotaging that shell. As I neared the town the shelling stopped, and at the entrance of each street was a tank with the guns pointed out. I pointed out the shell to the tank man thinking he would destroy it, but he didn't. I was damn scared and damn mad now! I couldn't understand why the enemy used as much ammo for just two men unless they

thought more troops were with us and couldn't see them.

After leaving the small town we headed into a forest and again dug foxholes but it was a relief to have food and be able to move around without being shot at. In a few days we were transported by trucks to another area, unloaded and we headed for another area of farm land and woods. As we neared this small town word was passed that the Germans had cut in behind us. We didn't know that we had walked into a trap. Now we would be cut off on four sides if they moved in from our rear. Again I and three others were ordered to take a rear guard action and hold until the rest of the company could make it to cover in the town. We positioned ourselves on each side of a shell crater and waited as it became dark. With each snap of a bush or limb broken by the weight of snow or ice I expected the enemy, and the rifle came up to position. The company had now made it into the small farm town but we had to stay put until given orders to rejoin the company. Soon we heard a footstep a pause and then another. All rifles swung around and waited as it came near. I could finally see a figure and waited till became closer. With guns on him we challenged, and he answered with his name. What a relief we were to rejoin the company, but by now the enemy was shooting flares that lit up the field almost like day. When they would burst, we didn't dare move until it fell to the ground. We made it to an abandoned farm house and were told to take positions at cellar windows and expect the enemy to attack at night. The early morning shelling around town didn't make me forget how hungry I was always cold, hungry and damn scared. A large pile of potatoes made the difference, wiping the mud off, we ate skins, dirt and all. A jar of fruit was found and passed around, each guy stretching his fingers to get a hand full. Day came and the shelling stopped. The next day was a relief that the attack never came, but was short lived as word came that we were to advance on the enemy. Some of our machine gunners and mortar men joined our platoon and were digging in an emplacement to cover us. Each time we tried to advance we were driven back by artillery fire. One shell was a direct hit on a machine gunner and assistant, nothing was left. As we withdrew from the field to the first house, a shell hit the roof blowing a big hole in it. I just knew some one was radioing information to the enemy when ever we moved out and in what direction. By now a combination of tension, fear and hate took over. I ask if anyone would back me up; I almost begged for someone to cover me as I searched the church steeple and another large house but got no takers. The next evening someone must have thought it was a good idea so four of us took the large three story house. A German civilian drunk as hell, met us and begged us not to go up in his attic and mess things up. There was no one but him and he had tears in his eyes, so soft hearted Americans, we left. The next day a couple guys came up with a small mortar and set it up across the road from our position, since they spotted the enemy on a hill across the field from us digging in a gun emplacement. We were subjected to machine gun fire each time we tried to cross the road. After a burst of fire, a guy would make a dash and another burst would follow, you had to be fast in between each burst. Guess the only time I could smile was when my buddy, who had found an overcoat, four sizes too large for himself, had its tail shot full of holes as it flew out behind him as he made his run across the road.

The mortar men fired about four rounds and two figures seemed to fall. I was some what sympathetic for them knowing the feeling. They claimed two kills anyway. Then back to the dirty potato pile for dinner. After some days of being surrounded we were again surprised by a unit of French Morocans that broke through with armored gun trucks to help us out. We explained about how every movement we made drew artillery fire. With that a gunman on the truck opened fire on the top floor of the building we attempted to search, with a tracer bullet, setting it on fire. Soon a figure ran from the house toward enemy lines and was shot down. No pity for him.

Later trucks made it through and we evacuated under cover of the armored unit.

We made it to a small farming town and a day without shelling was great. I could walk around without being shot at but it wasn't to last long. The colonel had us assemble in the center of town. Standing on the top step of what might have been a deserted hotel, he said "H Company located some mile to our right flank was captured"all but one man who escaped and reported

what happened. Another group of our men were taken prisoners then machine-gunned to death, because it was easier than to care for them. He said "The rotten bastards will pay now, from now on this unit will be known as Task-Force Linden. You will take no prisoners, you will kill every enemy you see, I know there are enemy sympathizers listening to what I say and I want them to carry it back to the enemy so they know what's in store for them." - As he rambled on I was thinking what a dumb thing to advertise what you intend to do. Now regardless of what the enemy might suffer from cold, hunger or lacking the will to continue, would have to fight to the end, knowing he would be killed if he tried to surrender.

Again the order was "move out." Mile after mile of walking through snow halfway up to our knees we came into a forest and met enemy rifle fire. I can't recall any particular target but I kept replacing empty shells and clips, always fearing I might have used my last shell. As the rifle fire stopped we dug in another foxhole and I sank in with helmet against the dirt to keep it from falling down my neck. I dozed off from exhaustion but it lasted only a short time. We were to be moved to another sector. I saw no prisoners.

If we were lucky we ate a cold ration and made instant coffee once a day but weren't lucky very often. I'll never forget how bitter cold it was and how hard it was to keep going. We hit it lucky this time as we stopped at a barn and slept out of the cold wind and snow. I developed the worst cough I ever had and was afraid it might give me away to the enemy. An old German woman motioned me to come into the house since I couldn't understand the language; she gave me a square of sugar and half a cup of clear liquid, motioning that I should dip the sugar in the liquid and drink from it. This went on for some time and the liquid wasn't going down at all. Each taste was still a sugar taste. Finally the call came to move out, so I ate the sugar square and gulped the cup of liquid, when I did, blue and red sparks of fire jumped out of my eyes and I thought someone drilled a hole in each ear. I didn't cough the rest of the winter. It must have been the fuel the Germans run their tanks on.

Entering a small town we ran into enemy rifle fire and took cover between the houses. Close by one of the guys was hit. He gave a scream then a whimpering cry. The call came out for medic, but what could a guy do but tape it up and leave him. There were no medical doctors and no way out. I felt helpless and sick.

Days and weeks went by and then months, but it made no difference. We didn't know the months or day or time of day. You tried to survive each day not looking any farther. It seemed as if the higher ups used us to test the enemies ability to hold their ground. Our unit seemed so much smaller but I didn't dare think about it. One day during a lull a soldier ran over and hung on the front of my jacket, looking me in the eyes he said "You're going to die today, You will be dead today." I stopped myself from smashing his face in with my rifle, but after a few seconds I realized he had too much combat time. He went to another guy and repeated the same lines and then another. What hurt so much was that I felt he was right. Some medic took him away, probably gave him medication or clobbered him like I nearly did.

The enemy had withdrawn as we came in without much resistance but now the enemy was using artillery on us from outside the town. As I was checking out a narrow street, one of the guys hurried up to me and saved "Your buddy Birney just got it, he stopped to make instant coffee and a shell burst blew half his face off. I was sick; I didn't want to know how it happened. Inside of me, I was mad as hell at him for telling me. Now there was no one I felt close to.

After walking through deep snow and freezing weather for what seemed like a hundred miles though it may only have been two or five, we saw a long line of civilians walking toward us out of the small town we were heading for. They were pulling carts and wooden wheelbarrows loaded down with their personnel possessions and little kids on top of them; their faces red as fire from the cold. I had to pity them especially the small kids. We soon took to the woods outside of town

which surprised me, usually we were expected to do things the hard way; out in the open. The officer pulled his pistol out holding it over his head shouting "follow me men." At last we have a leader I thought but I was wrong again. The enemy must have known or seen our advance and was raking the woods with machine gun fire, cutting off small tree branches that fell on our helmets as we neared the town. Now we came to the edge of the woods, a narrow road led into town about a hundred yards from our position. The officer took cover behind a large bolder and pointed at me and another guy. Take the first house. I couldn't believe I was to be sacrificed again. I looked at all the other guys and thought "why me?" I carry no rank I'm no different than they are. Where are the sergeants who I thought were the leaders. I seemed to be in the wrong place at the right time. He signaled to go and we headed up the road for the first large building. One of the enemy machine-gunners spotted us and let loose. His bullets blasted across the road blowing dirt and snow nearly at our feet. We dived into a ditch for cover striking my knee on a large rock. The pain would have been much worse if it wasn't that my body was so cold. It hurt like hell anyway. Our men opened up then and soon someone yelled "It's o.k. we blasted him out of a church belfry and we took off again and made it to the first building. Hugging the wall from enemy rifle fire I reached for the door knob as this guy pulled my hand away. It might be booby trapped, he said and with that he smashed the big glass window and opened it from inside, not even feeling for a wire trip. Guess he just wanted to strike at something. We didn't know which was worse, facing fire from within or out on the street. Inside the door of what might have been a hotel, we started up the steps as quietly as possible. At each room I crouched on one knee, rifle pointed as the other guy would swing the door open. This was enough tension to make you sweat in freezing weather. With the upper rooms cleared we headed for the lower section. As we neared the door we could hear low voices, I didn't know what to do now. I thought all civilians had left town when we were advancing. I was hoping the enemy would surrender instead of a fight. Pulling out a grenade my buddy was going to throw it into the room when I stopped him. I said there maybe women or kids in there; just cover me when I go in. I swung the door open and a group of civilians screamed to high heaven. I looked them over and motioned for them to shut up. Looking the rest of the large room over we found bushels of all kinds of apples and dried meat. We filled our pockets with apples and took a rest. If we had to be the first in town we deserved a break. Preventing the civilians from being killed by his grenade even though they may have been enemy sympathizers, was a good feeling. Back out on the street things quieted down as the enemy withdrew and we moved to the far edge of town eating apples, but they weren't satisfying. When I saw a civilian come toward our group eating half a loaf of bread I offered three packs of cigarettes for a chunk in sign language. He returned later with one slice. We had smokes; we never had time to use, but little food.

I guess some one wasn't satisfied with an easy take of the town, because before long we were heading out again. More woods but at least we weren't being shot at. Finally the group halted for what I thought was a ten minute break, but this officer ordered each man to pick up two grenades and then the shocker, ordered fixed bayonets. I thought he was nuts. I'd rather let the enemy alone rather than look for trouble but if I had to; I wasn't going to use a bayonet as long as I had plenty of shells. I saw an officer walk back in the woods to a soldier and give him hell for urinating in the woods, when in the next few minutes he might be dead. Now I knew he was nuts. With grenades on each side of my belt and bayonet on the rifle we came out of the woods onto an open field, maybe five hundred yards across to more woodland where the enemy was holding as we soon learned. I was given a backpack of 30 millimeter mortar shells to carry which made things even tougher. Not even knowing where the mortar man was, the order was given to attack. It seemed there would be no resistance the first hundred yards and then the enemy cut loose with rifle, machine gun and artillery. It caught us by surprise. We have been moving as fast as we could toward their position in the woods, but I put on extra speed feeling I would have a better chance if I could make it to the woods even if the enemy was there. It held a little more promise than being an easy target in the field. It was my mistake; I can't blame anyone but myself. In the excitement, I had advanced ahead of the unit quite some distance when I heard some one yell 'turn back!' I stopped and looked back to see the guys withdrawing as rifle and artillery was raking the field. I fell to the ground and began to crawl back until all hell broke loose. I couldn't

go any farther; the explosions shook the ground like an earthquake. Looking out over the field was just a blurred vision of snow and dirt. I felt weightless from the ground heaving. I rammed my hands down into the snow to grab anything to hold my body from bouncing and give the enemy riflemen a better target. I hung onto a handful of weeds as my legs bounced up and down off the ground. I glanced toward the unit and saw most had made it back, but it seemed as if the enemy was concentrating more on me now. I thought this was my finish. Explosions were ripping across right in front of me, then across right in back. They were putting a pattern on me. Then they blasted from my left towards me. The tension was almost too much. I prayed that I might live long enough to raise my two kids so they wouldn't be a burden for my wife to raise. Then came the explosion right by me, throwing me about six feet sideways. It was like having your head in a church bell and having it hit with a large hammer. The pain in my ears was almost unbearable and then I must have passed out. It may have been but a short time, but I saw my son who might have been a year and a half in his Mother's right arm. I could see everything so clear. My daughter must have been about four. She was yanking on her Mother's dress and looking up she said, "When is Daddy coming home?" I saw her Mother with a big tear rolling down her cheek saying, "He isn't coming home," and then I came back to reality.

My left leg, side and arm had no feeling. I rolled over and with my right hand I felt my left arm and leg for blood. I was o.k. except the sharp pain in my ear from the concussion. I was so emotionally exhausted I lay there not caring anymore. I could see for just an instant large chunks of shrapnel fly high in the sky. I became so relaxed for a while nothing bothered me. I had forgotten about the pack of mortar shells strapped to my back until the rifle shells snapped about me. The artillery fire ceased; I guessed they thought I was killed. Slowly a few inches at a time then stopping then a few inches more I kept working my way back to our line. Later I thought the enemy took me for an officer since I was in advance of the unit. They should have known an officer wouldn't lead. Gradually the enemy rifle fire lifted and I slowly gained more yards trying not to draw more fire. Finally the firing stopped. I thought in their opinion, a wounded man reduces a unit's ability to act more than a dead one so they let me crawl the rest of the way back or else out of sympathy they let me go the last few yards. I was now about fifty feet from a house and saw one of our guys shouting from a cellar way to head for it. I ran and dived head first down the steps. I must have laid there for sometime and when finally I raised my head I saw an officer on one knee with tears rolling down his face. At first I hated him for getting us in this position. To attack across an open field when off to our right were hedgerows, that would have offered some protection was damn poor judgment, but then I realized that he wasn't the one that ordered this. He may have taken the loss to heart and so I let my head fall and a few tears. I no longer cared. I had too much.

We withdrew as night set in and walked all night, stopping every hour or so to rest. I felt like a living dead man. Falling down on the icy road during break time. I would fall asleep in the freezing weather until a shove from someones foot would wake me. Threw the night I saw the officer come along side of me and began to question me about the mortar shells and began raising hell because I didn't have them. I may have been dead on my feet but I couldn't take that. In a loud angry voice I told him when I was nearing the edge of town under fire I heard the guys who made it back from the field yell to roll out of the pack which I did. I said our training required us to follow orders, regardless who gave them. I said if you want the G-damn shells, with your permission I'll go back and get them. I now recognized him as the one who gave the attack order and must have gotten cold feet when we were halfway there. He said no more and walked away. For a minute I had life back in me.

By morning we came to a small farming village. It meant we could rest and sleep. We were too exhausted to even be hungry. Probably the next day as I recall there were three of us in this room trying to keep warm when an officer came in. He asked if I would take over as sergeant, saying we only had thirty-three men in "F" company left and sixty in "G" company out of two hundred and seventy when the unit was committed. We were getting new replacements that had no combat

experience. I said that I had all I could do to survive without taking the responsibility of others. He ask the other soldier who was in the same shape as I and he refused. The other must have had frozen feet by the way he walked and he refused. Then the officer explained that the next sergeant would be inexperienced in combat and it was up to us, then left. It made no difference to me who was in charge. I had no leader all winter, just damn orders from officers I didn't know. The new replacement soldiers arrived looking fresh, clean and curious, compared to those of us who, most of the winter, had no chance to bath or rest. That evening they introduced themselves and showed pictures of their wives and kids, asking what it was like up front. Looking at the photos of their kids really hurt realizing I too had kids back home. I couldn't be honest with them. I said something to the effect that things get a little exciting at times but not to worry they would make it o.k., the enemy was holding but there advance was stopped. I didn't learn until after the war was over that the enemies fuel supply was exhausted though they had plenty of ammo.

The next day we expected to rest but the top officer ordered us to maneuver around the woods and fields just for exercise and he had some damn mad guys on his hands. By this time, I couldn't recognize anyone, not even the few guys of the original outfit but after walking some distance threw the snow I came up to a guy that was firing a tommy gun at small trees, cutting them off at the base. It was the staff sergeant who had come back at night to find and relieve us from a rear guard position we were ordered to hold while the rest of the company made it into a town. I felt good now and we both cursed about not being given a rest, every once in a while he would let loose a burst from his machine gun he was so mad. It wasn't long before a jeep came roaring up beside us and the colonel jumped out, rushed over and began raising hell about his firing the tommy gun. He was shouting at him about doing his shooting when we returned to combat and not here. The sergeant listened until the officer was done then he spit and said, "Colonel I have more damn krouts to my credit than you'll ever have" then cut loose with another burst of fire, cutting off another small tree. The officer knew better than push it. He jumped in the jeep and took off. It was most satisfying.

The next day we were transported by truck for several miles in what direction none of us knew. We must have been the least informed unit in France. The trucks finally stopped and we set out again threw the snow on foot. The tension was even greater heading back to combat after two days away from it than if we had remained in a holding position especially for those of us in the original unit. In the last few months it became more difficult to carry on a conversation. Not recognizing anyone and expecting the worst you live by the day and hours with no end to the conflict, so words have little meaning. As we approached the small farming town we drew some small arms fire for a short time and then it stopped as we entered the town. there must have been a few of the enemy observing from town our advance and then withdrew to their main line of resistance outside the opposite end of the village. Reaching the sides of town facing the enemy we received artillery fire and began to dig foxholes. I hadn't completed mine when an officer chose the new sergeant, me as usual, and two others to crawl about a hundred yards out of town to a stone building and observe the enemy for a counter attack. I had reached the point where I didn't care much about anything or anyone. We crawled out to the building taking advantage of a few bushes and trees for cover and drew no fire. The building had been hit with an artillery shell during the time we took the town and blew an eight foot diameter hole threw a two foot thick rock wall. The explosion threw the rock on a large pile and I could see pieces of Christmas tree branches, broken Christmas decorations and kids broken rocking horse under the stone. I began pulling rock away thinking there may have been some little kid under it, until one of the guys reminded me no one could have survived a hit like this so I took a position looking across the field for enemy activity. I didn't know what day or month it was but this was a sad reminder of Christmas . As we lay on the pile of rubble looking out across the field toward what seemed to be a cluster of industrial buildings, I spotted a few enemy soldiers run from one building to another and then a few more at intervals . It was too great a distance for accurate rifle fire so I told the new sergeant about them. He looked out and said "Harass them with your rifle." "Harass you ass," I said, they have a tank over there some where that blew this eight foot hole threw the wall we e looking out of; I don't

want another one while I'm here. Then he asked me to keep track of how many I saw running from one building to another. After ten or fifteen minutes I gave him account of between forty and fifty. Like the rest of us, he didn't know what to do and ask for suggestions. If I were in charge, I told him, I would get back to the company officer and see if he can contact some nearby artillery unit to lay down fire on the building. About half an hour later he returned, aid contact was made of a unit near by, but they had used their quota of shells for the day and couldn't help. I hadn't heard any friendly fire from our side all winter. We took it as a sick joke, and just lay there waiting for some action from the enemy all day into the night. It was an uncomfortable position knowing if the enemy had seen us during the day, they might come across and toss a few grenades in under cover of darkness. As we lay there on the pile of rock we heard a cow bellowing from the basement at ground level. One of the guys said come on lets go down and milk her . Well I wasn't going to get too close to any cow but offered to give him moral support, I don't like big animals. He milked the cow by light from a cigarette lighter, into his steel helmet and we had warm milk, dirt and all. After a period of sometime we were with drawn to another area for what reason I don't know. There may have been another unit taking a holding position after we moved out. My swollen knee made it a little difficult when it came to climbing hills in all the snow but I had no pain, it was just that my leg became stiff and didn't want to bend. An injury I had received avoiding machine gun fire by diving into a snow covered ditch several weeks ago or was it months? You loose all track of time. Half way up we could hear the explosions of artillery ahead and then the sun came out, the first time all winter and it was a welcome sight after months of cold dreary weather. We heard the drone of airplanes and looking up saw a large group of our big silver bombers flying over. The weather had finally broken and they could now locate there target. What a great sight. Below was another unit that had escaped the surrender of some enemy soldiers and were heading to the rear as others were shouting "Shoot the sons a bitches. "We learned later they were not professional soldiers. They claimed the professional enemy S.S. troopers forced them to fight or be shot.

After sometime we again entered the forest with snow falling from the tree limbs. We came up to a small cottage that look like it might be a hunting cabin. It was real quiet all around us and I was admiring how it was built, like a storybook house; when rifle fire began. I can't say what took place but down at my side, I could feel the recoil of my rifle as it fired again and again until after it was empty, my finger kept pulling the trigger. It was a bad dream. I must have been in shock from too many engagements. I can only remember after standing there for I don't know how long; I walked up to two enemy dead. With my empty rifle barrel I raised the helmet of the one. He was a young blond soldier and I thought of his mother or wife that would cry someday and I felt real bad. The other was somewhat older than I and was in need of a shave. The firing had stopped but I stood there confused and mentally exhausted. Finally I heard someone yell "come on, we're moving out," and I did but couldn't get the nightmare out of my mind. I couldn't think clear any more, nor care. How we had come into this small town, I don't know but by now I was physically and emotionally exhausted and found myself laying on the floor of a building. I had blacked out and my body was throbbing. A doctor checked me out and the next day I was ordered to the rear. I couldn't communicate nor recognize anyone as I looked for someone of the original unit.

After a few weeks out of combat in a town where I helped sort equipment, an officer came into the building and wanted to talk. By his insignia I knew he was a doctor. He asked if I would sign papers for the Purple Heart. Though it was difficult to talk, I told him I wasn't wounded, that I hurt it avoiding enemy gun fire. He said it made no difference; I was injured in combat and was entitled to it. I refused on the grounds that it would cheapen the meaning of such an award . He then requested I go to a hospital . Thinking it would be a short visit, as he implied, I agreed. The hospital train was filled with wounded. After several weeks of refusing to return my uniform, I felt my combat days were over. The war ended about a week after being released from the Center. There was very little celebration among us. We were just glad for the end. I was paid ten dollars a month extra for the six months of combat.

End.



The pleasure my Grandson received from these few experiences I wrote about was worthwhile. You see, shortly after he was diagnosed as having Leukemia. He was a real quiet boy, looking forward to attending a university ... and now he had a battle of his own. The pain was almost too much to see him suffer. I gave him my combat infantryman's badge and my bronze star because no soldier ever put up more of a fight and never once complained. When asked how he was doing, the answer was always, "Good." He was our only Grandson. He lost his fight, but won a greater reward than we could ever give him.