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To: Lt. Col. Keith E. Bonn, USA.

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Ref. Comments on Questionnaire :

"When the Odds Were Even" by Lt. Col. K. E. Bonn

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I Leadership

In general I say our leadership was good and we had confidence in our leaders. At the Div. top Maj. Gen. C. Haffner, may have been a good organizer but he definitely was not an inspiring leader, mainly because we never saw him and didn't know him. The only time I ever saw him was as a distant figure on a reviewing stand in Texas. Really an unknown quantity to the troops.

What a contrast was Maj. ^{GEN.} Anthony McAuliffe! He was frequently seen in the area riding in an open jeep inspecting the area, terrain and troop dispositions. After our battalion pulled a tough night raid on Roth bach he was there the next morning, individually shaking our hands and congratulating us. All that made you feel that the man on top knew what was going on at the troop level and was not far off in the rear somewhere reading status reports. We felt we were more than a unit symbol on a situation map.

Col. Donovan P. Yeuelles, 411 Regimental commander, was also well respected. We knew he had served in the same area in WWI, had lost a son at Normandy and was one tough old, Nazi hating officer. When called to move up to give support to "A" company at Saulcy in what was to become our first real fire fight (I was an asst. machine gunner in weapons platoon), we saw the Col. come sauntering down the middle of the road toward us, wearing his almost white officer's coat and telling us that there was nothing up there but a few snipers. The fact that a few minutes later we were receiving heavy machine gun, rifle, and mortar fire and that he might have misjudged the situation a bit was O.K. at least he was up there and trying to inspire our confidence.

Our battalion commander and company commander were good and of course seen regularly and all seemed to try to do the best they could tactically and in taking care of the men as well as possible under the very trying conditions; ice, cold, miserable weather and lack of hot food. (We lived almost entirely on K rations for days on end)

As to our 2nd Lt. platoon leader we went from bad to good. Our first one

who we trained with and went overseas with meant well but I always figured he wasn't too smart, and became sure of it after he almost had my gunner and me killed by having us set up in an exposed position to fire from, when good cover in a sunken road just in front of us was available. We moved into the cover first chance we got and after that didn't pay any more attention to him than necessary. His replacement came up to us at Sesenheim where we had the gun and some riflemen at the edge of some woods in close proximity and observation of the Germans. A few of us were introduced to him about 100 yards to the rear and then one of the Sgts. took him up to show him our position, after warning him to stay low and close and crawl all the way. He suddenly said he couldn't see well enough, stood up and was immediately cut down by German machine gun fire and killed instantly. I don't think he had lasted half an hour with us. [Please tell those new guys, officers and men, to listen to the veterans and not to try to be heroes the first day. You learn fast and if you can get through your first few fire fights and artillery barrages your chances get better. Another example; we lost two brand new replacements on our raid on Rothback to the first artillery shell that came in that night, they probably never heard it.]

(at Sesenheim)

Our final platoon leader was top notch, a great leader and a man who would not ask you to do anything he wouldn't do. He proved that by a recon into enemy lines to inspect a bridge, for which he was rightfully awarded a Silver Star. (Lt. Harry Weber, see Mueller and Turk page 81, 103rd Div., "Report After Action").

II Camaraderie

One thing that enhanced camaraderie between us was the fact that many of us had come from the good life as ASTP and Air Corps cadets. From that to the infantry was a bit of a rude shock and we therefore felt close as we were all in the same boat. (Misery loves company). Also the 6 months training was bound to help friendships which still hold today.

I do remember an incident that helped my ASTP group feel better about our non-coms which occurred first night in the barracks. It was cold and rainy, no heat in the barracks, (mid March in TX.) and as I recall we only had one blanket apiece. The sergeants and older guys saw we hadn't been issued winter coats and they offered theirs to get ^{vs} through the night. You remember things like that.

As you well know; camaraderie, how ever obtained in a military unit is important as it is probably the main item that keeps a unit together and going ahead. It is fear of letting your buddy down and knowing that they will have to carry your load in addition to theirs that makes you want to keep going. Patriotism and pride also help but Mom's apple-pie does little to drive you on. I think we did lose some

of that feeling after we received replacements who had not had as lengthy or thorough training as we had and it took considerable time for us to simulate and completely trust and rely on them.

III Training

I believe our training was good but I think it would have been helpful to do more company and platoon size problems. The large battalion/regimental training maneuvers may teach the officers what it takes to move and coordinate troops but to the individual its little help as we usually have little or no information on the objective of the maneuver. What should be taught and emphasized is individual initiative. Teach everyone to fire his weapons without waiting for an officer or Non-com's directions. They did teach us "Fire and Movement" but it should be taught at the individual and squad level. Find some cover or provide covering fire for your buddy, try to flank the enemy or get to a position where you can fire on him or at least in the general direction if you don't know where he is. I can remember two incidents where I, or we, could have done better and at least laid some fire in the general direction of the enemy. I know the above is obvious but it is tough to do because if you are in some cover it takes training and initiative to leave it to help your buddies to keep moving. However, if you don't, you all could be pinned down and thus give the enemy a chance to bring mortar or artillery on you.

I'd say we were not well trained for night movements but we quickly learned as we climbed up and down steep muddy mountains in complete darkness. (Remember almost a whole continent was under black-out conditions, that's dark!) We sometimes had to hold onto the man in front to keep from getting separated. In some places it was so steep we had to crawl up, following a communications wire for direction.

The fact that we had trained in the hot lands of Texas didn't help prepare us for these conditions.

^{cold}

IV The Enemy

The Germans were tenacious in their delaying actions but were usually routed by some maneuvering around them, because through the Vosges Mountains they couldn't set-up a continuous line. If we kept pressure on them they frequently would pull back during the night as I expect they were worried about being cut off by our over the mountain routines.

The only atrocity I recall was a case of atrocity breeding atrocity. As we

were moving out of Barr our advance units were pinned down in the open by a machine gun. When one of our aid-men (Medic) got up to help the wounded he was immediately shot down and killed. After some time those gunners were captured (with the aid of one of the few tanks we saw in this period) and one of our riflemen was ordered to take them to the rear. A short time later he came back and said they tried to get away and he had shoot them both. Who knows? Judge for yourself.

V Awards and Decorations

Medals did seem to be given out a bit sparsely at rifle company level but when they were I believe they were well deserved, except for a few Purple Hearts given for little more than a scratch. Officers and rear eschelon guys seemed to get more and undeserved ones; I remember hearing of some Hg. Sgt. getting a Bronze Star for his typing! I believe that anyone serving in a line company for more than a month has probably earned a least a Bronze Star. (I understand they are now awarded when the Combat Inf Badge is earned; a good idea but, should be with the "V" for valor to differentiate from a meritorious award, incidentally I'm still waiting for my "V" to put on mine)

I believe the most outstanding and deserving were eventually given some award. Any delays or omissions were probably due to the fact that during combat the company officers and clerks were too busy to put in for the award and by the time there was opportunity the incident may have been forgotten, or those involved no longer around. Most of the time we had little time to think about it but the awards were appreciated when received.

VI French Civilians

I recall our first contact with French civilians while under combat conditions. On our first day of combat we had taken the ridge of a hill above St. Die with-out having a shot fired at us; we were therefore much relieved and too relaxed. Two young French men came up and mixed with us and offered some bread and pieces of fried rabbit. As they were circulating around, the food quickly gone, we rec'd our first blast, an 88mm. from a tank in the town, we eventually figured out. This got our immediate attention and slightly wounded several of our men. The Frenchmen were both wounded more severely. Their presence and food were appreciated even though they may have drawn attention to our position.

Another time as we were coming down out of the mountains near Barr an old man came out of his humble hut and stood giving us each a chuck of what was his

only loaf of black bread, as we filed by. What more could you ask of him? We knew he was doing the best that he could to thank us for liberation.

Few civilians were seen in the small villages of the V^oges but later under more stable conditions we did meet some when billeted in Ingwiller. Our squad was billeted in a house with a family which had two teenage sisters who were much admired by us, especially when they gave us each a kiss as we filed out on a night patrol. Very good for morale! You can understand how a man would fight more intensely when on his own land.

VII Misc. Thoughts and Memories

One of my gripes has always been our lack of adequate winter clothing. I'm sure soldiers are much better equipped now but we didn't get heavy winter clothing until just after Christmas. We rec'd a heavy lined overall with a lined vest to go under the field jacket, a vast improvement. Another gripe was to see rear echelon, MP's etc., wearing good heavy stuff before the front line troops got them; we needed them most as we frequently were without decent shelter for several days and nights at a time. Since all equipment, food etc. has to move from rear to front it should behoove all officers involved to give priority to getting it up to where it will do the most good and to severely discipline and short-stopping in the rear area. We were fortunate to have been equipped with shoe-pac boots, possibly one of the first divisions to receive them. Our feet were still cold but if you changed your insoles and socks when halted for the night you could usually avoid frost bite or trench foot. The problem for the non-coms was to make sure the men changed; after awhile some guys would rather let their feet freeze to get a trip to the rear.

We originally had only one blanket and would wrap it around some how and wear the rain coat to act as wind breaker and ground cloth. (The raincoat was ingeniously designed so that all water would run down and fill the pockets. I think they were WWI surplus and evidently no one had ever bothered to improve them.) The new sleeping bags we finally got were very good, but winter gloves did not hold up well, fingers would wear through and they stayed wet. Oh well, I guess all the above clothing complaints are moot now as I'm sure the equipment is much better now. I hope everything is well tested under actual and all expected conditions.

I did keep a roster of our weapons platoon and towns we went through. Of 33 original members of our weapons platoon we had 4 killed and 17 wounded and of 44 replacements 3 were killed (instantly as noted above) and 10 wounded. Most of the wounded replacements were among the first batch we got and all of those wounded were in the Mar. 15, '45 push to the Rhine. None of the replacements we

got after that (about 22) were wounded except one, as we had an easy go into Germany and Austria. Most of the losses not listed above were to trench foot or frozen feet plus a few transfers. (I don't know how they got those transfers.) At the end of the war there were only eight of the original 33 still there and one of those had been off the line a couple months with trench foot. I was fortunate enough to be one of those final eight but I don't know why except the Good Lord must have had his eye out for me. It is also interesting that there was at least one survivor from each of the 5 squads; 2 from each m.gun, one from each mortar squad plus one sergeant.

One of our survival schemes may be of interest to you, we called it playing "Lucky Pierre". This meant getting 3 or more guys together who were trying to get some sleep on the cold ground. You would lie down as close together as possible and of course the ones in the center were warmer and therefore the name. When one in the center had to get up for guard duty his spot would be quickly usurped on a seniority or quickness basis.

I think experiences have affected my philosophy of life to some extent. Although I've always been of an optimistic nature getting through the war unscathed increased that attitude. When I think "What's the worst that could happen?" Has it a life or death consequence?" Since it is seldom that serious in civilian life it means that even if your decision is wrong (and you will usually be right more often than not) then take your best shot at it. Or as they say now; Don't sweat the little stuff and there is no big stuff."

One more thought on atrocities. As we went through the villages we found so many were burning or blowing up. I first thought it was the result of artillery barrages but soon wised up to the fact that it was the result of German scorched earth policy. One more reason for us to finish the job and clear them out. My wife and I went back to Alsace in 1984 and again in 1989 and I was especially pleased to see how well the houses had been restored; the wood work painted and bright, instead of the ubiquitous grey, and most manure piles removed. Our 1989 trip was with a 103rd group invited back by the people of Paffanhoffen to celebrate the 45th anniversary of their liberation. The people were really appreciative of us and entertained us with many receptions, lunches and dinners.

One more stray thought. I sincerely believe that the front line troops, down to the lowest PVT should be kept informed of the situation as much as possible, within the bounds of security. Since the infantryman's world only extends from his foxhole to the next it is a great morale booster to know, at least approximately, where the next company/battalion is and what the general goal and plan of attack is. It keeps him from feeling more or less alone and helps him to realize there is a coherent plan. We generally got information in rumor form and never knew where

we were and what we were doing before we did it.

Wow! 15 pages of meandering musings, just think what I might have done with a tape recorder and a beer! I never thought I would go on so long but then this is the first time anyone in the Army ever asked this PFC for his opinion. I know I'd been mulling these thoughts over for 50 years so now I've got a lot of it down on paper. Well maybe my grand-sons will be interested.

I do admire what you are doing to collect all these thoughts and memories from many of us and hope it provides you with a feel for those times which will enable you to come up with a good book.

In closing I've often thought that the cold was tougher to take than the artillery because the cold was incessant (seldom a chance to warm up) and the artillery kept your mind off the cold for a short time.

I do hope some of the above will be useful for your book and the training of troops and officers. If I can be of any help in the future just ask.

Sincerely
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