

78
Gene Halpern
C
410

SCHILLERSDORF, ALSACE, NORTHERN FRANCE
January 27, 1945
August, 7, 2006

“NO ONE IN HIS RIGHT MIND WOULD-----”

THAT PHRASE VIVIDLY ISOLATES THREE VERY MEMORABLE ENCOUNTERS (AMONG THE MANY) THAT “STAND OUT” IN MY MIND. THOSE MEN IN OUR “C” COMPANY, 410TH INFANTRY, 103rd DIVISION BATTLED THE GERMAN FORCES IN THE ALSACE PLAINS IN NORTHEAST FRANCE DURING THE COLD THE WINTER OF 1945. TWO OF THOSE EVENTS, COSTLY DECISIONS MADE BY OUR OWN COMMANDERS, RESULTED IN MANY G.I. CASUALTIES BOTH KILLED AND WOUNDED.

THE THIRD BATTLE DECISION, A SUPRISING ONE MADE BY THE GERMAN S S TROOPS, SAVED A LOT OF LIVES! MAYBE MINE INCLUDED!

Our 103rd Infantry went “ON LINE” and had our first encounter with the German forces November 11th, 1944 (Armistice Day” would you believe), facing the coldest winter in the Vosges Mountains in 40 years, we were told. We walked and fought the enemy from one small town to another. The Germans used those very old French homes as pill boxes--forcing us to literally blow them to pieces as we battled our way through the snowy mountains. Our very first encounter resulted in deaths and casualties among the fellows-- friends we had lived and trained with for many months in Texas.

Schillersdorf Page 2

On through the winter of '44 and into '45, tired, cold and determined, we continued to lose members of our "CHARLIE" Company in isolated fire fights as the Germans stubbornly defended the French territory they were occupying.

I spent Christmas sharing an icy foxhole and wonderful philosophy with Tony Hillerman near a little village, Bousbach, maintaining my contribution of a very tentative, widespread force on the southern flank of the German army as it raced toward Bastogne and its ultimate defeat in the bloody, notorious ----

"BATTLE OF THE BULGE".

January, 1945, found my group facing, not a rag-tag force of conscripties desparately resisting our advances, but fresh, dedicated, well equipped legions of the renowned S S troops. They had been (we later were informed) stationed in Norway and were brought to face the 7th Army front. They were fresh and dedicated to stopping our aggression, maintaining Germanys' hold on north eastern France and starting THEIR OWN BULGE!!!

" 'NO ONE IN HIS RIGHT MIND-----# 1' "

January 17th soon became a nightmare. My first major encounter with those troops found me in a late afternoon charging, riflemen, bayonets fixed, and me, firing my machinegun from the hip as I ran across 200 yards of flat, slippery snow fields. This was planned to be a full battalian offense but became ONLY "C" COMPANY!

The dozen Sherman tank forces supporting me were immediately smashed and destroyed by the superior, infamous 88 mm. cannons of the German armored! Our goal was a woods protected by rows of well dug-in enemy riflemen and machine gun nests. We suffered scores of dead and wounded, yet, amazingly, our objective was taken and held for a few hours until dawn. A vicious counter-attack heavily outnumbering

us forced me to give up my position and retreat back across those same open fields trying to carry our surviving wounded. We withdrew 10 miles.

“ ‘NO ONE IN HIS RIGHT MIND-----’ cont. #3’ ”.

A tiny town, Neifern, “Bloody Neifern”, had been photographed from the air as purportedly one of the most heavily mined areas facing us. Two platoons of our company were assigned a night raid into this town to take and return with a German prisoner. The rifle platoon was supported by my light machine gun and George Rice and Robert Yager. Our mortar people went along as stretcher bearers.

The land mine report was correct! As I approached in the near- total darkness enemy fire forced us to spread out into the fields and into the mines which exploded around and under us with devastation, killing and wounding. We held one of houses for about an hour and then, without a prisoner, withdrew. I supported the left front of a stretcher carrying a hurt fellow and kicking the “shoe mines” aside.

One member of our mortar squads, Tony Hillerman, was among the unfortunate who stepped on an unseen mine ravaging his leg and eye though he DID survive to become a journalist, college professor and famous author.

Earlier in January we were recovering in the plains of Alsace, ‘way back of the “front” lines, even a bit to the rear of our mighty “155 Howitzers”. Still in semi shock, we were even pampered with, to our disbelief;

HOT SHOWERS--TENTS IN THE SNOW ADJACENT TO AN ICE COVERED STREAM! AND THE FIRST CLEAN UNDERWEAR SINCE OCTOBER. Memory tells me THAT WAS IT until the ending in May.

page 4

SCHILLERSDORF

Short-lived peace of the infantry found us spending several days to the rear again. On January 25th the aforementioned SS had over run one of our positions, driving our 2nd Battalion out of a little known, near-by town of SCHILLERSDORF. This incursion immediately created the need for us to, once again, fill in and repel the SS, restoring our divisions' lines of aggression. I was just barely over the trauma of Sessenheim.

Clean underwear (long johns too) and all, we were trucked, mid-day, to a woods at the foot of a barren orchard. Again our objective sat a couple hundred yards, up a snowy, frozen slope to the edge of the town and old houses built of stone, brick and mortar.

Our Olive Drab jackets, pants and helmets combined to make us clearly outstanding targets in that snowy orchard, naked of vegetation other than the bare fruit trees. (Note: the enemy troops were equipped with long white coats and white covers over their steel helmets).

Any attempt at this point to describe our apprehension would be inadequate! But we were dedicated to following orders and above all, to maximize our support of one another with all the wile and skills we'd honed to a sharp edge!! And to get the job done!

Some of the fellows rolled in the snow hoping, if not to totally vanish, to at least reduce their role as well defined targets. My clumsy, 35 pound machine gun made it almost impossible for me to become snow covered, a doubtful camouflage at best. .

So up barren the hill I went.

(It has later been said that each of us, at times, dwelled in a cocoon of near isolation and fear while anticipating those fierce, initial bursts of fire from the "Burp Guns" and mortar explosions.) Every step up that hill DID seem unreal!

page 5

IN OUR SECTOR WE MET NO RESISTANCE!

Most unreal of all, off to our right, all hell was breaking loose. Later we learned of the many dead and injured from the battle that took place in and about a cemetery, a very short distance from our jump off starting point in the woods. The S S were ready using the tombstones as protection.

(47 years later a group of us, with our wives, revisited Schillersdorf and several of the fellows found themselves unable to resist re-climbing that stone cemetery wall replete with memories of the horrors of that day, January 27, 1945. Others of us, those who had advanced on the snowy hillside went to the edge of town and tried to imagine how we, as perfect targets, achieved the advance without a shot being fired). That respite lasted for moments as we then went house to house fighting almost hand to hand.

Our conclusion: The Germans DID NOT anticipate our attack or defend that slope of such open ground with nowhere to take even momentary cover from aggressive firing.

“NO ONE IN HIS RIGHT MIND WOULD-----”

The following day encountering fiercer resistance we outflanked the enemy killing and capturing many. One vivid memory was that of 1st Lt. Hallway standing beside a Sherman tank directing its fire and collapsing from the concussion of its' cannon. Another was later as I walked down the street with my .45 pistol cocked and near the spine of an SS we found hiding under a haystack. Fellow machine gunner George Rice held his ground pouring fire from a very vulnerable spot holding the enemy at bay and earning the award of the Silver Star for extra gallant bravery.

Mission completed, we returned to “Our War” and more encounters. none more or less unnerving but with seemingly better defined action and orders.