

ANZIO

From Benevento the 100th went by sea to Anzio, the beachhead established by the Allied forces north of Cassino where they could not punch through the German defenses.

The First Days

Our landing ship docked against a sunken freighter, and we unloaded and were trucked to a camp site in an open area outside of the city. That first night, shortly after dusk there was an enemy bomber raid over the port. I really wasn't aware of it except that all of a sudden, as I was standing outside my tent, all kinds of firing broke out all around. I had not even been aware of the presence of all the guns, various anti-aircraft guns, but they seemed to be everywhere. Explosions rocked the sky, tracers wove crisscrossing patterns in the dark, light and dark alternated from the gun flashes, and very close by someone was firing a machine gun.

As I stood in awe, it crossed my mind that they had certainly been stingy with live ammo during training in the States, yet here they were certainly blowing a lot of it. There was no indication of enemy planes being hit, and finally after some time all was quiet.

Now we moved closer to but not yet on the front lines. It was like a campout. Clear water flowed through a drainage ditch near our tents, like irrigation water in a cane field. We bathed, laundered underwear and socks, and generally relaxed. Some of the boys dumped concussion grenades in the larger pools in the canal into which our ditch emptied and harvested some fish. Others found eels, or unagi, in the reeds lining the ditch.

One day as we were watching one of our light artillery observation planes in flight, it suddenly exploded. We wondered if it had been accidentally hit by a shell from one of the guns it was observing for.

Another day we stood fascinated as we watched a few fighter planes dueling in the sky. We could not tell which were ours and which theirs. Two plunged to earth trailing smoke, one at a distance and one just on the other side of a ridge in front of us. That one bore a clearly visible black cross... German!

I do not remember seeing any parachutes.

On The Line

The 100th now relieved another outfit which had been manning outpost positions facing enemy lines. We took over their daytime quarters in scattered farmhouses and related structures. From these we moved out each evening to the outpost lines or for guard duty or patrols.

Our squad inherited as sleeping quarters a concrete grain silo about twelve feet or so in diameter which had been lined on the inside with dirt-filled sandbags. About two-thirds of the way up the side was a large hole which must have been the result of a direct hit by enemy artillery sometime in the past. This was relatively flat country with farmhouses every half mile or so on farm lots developed in a symmetrical pattern. All of the houses were damaged by shellfire, some more than others.

The enemy occupied the high ground beyond and commanded a good view of all activity in the lower flat land we occupied. Any movement by day had to be concealed, and thus most of the activity took place at night.

The first night that we went up to the foxholes on the front line finally brought the reality of war to those of us replacements who had not yet been in combat. In retrospect it was a gradual initiation that afforded us time to adapt. Still, it was always nerve-wracking, sitting alone in a foxhole about ten yards away from the next buddy, staying tense and alert all night in the darkness and quiet, guarding against any attack or infiltration by the enemy. Occasional machine gun fire could be heard in the distance, and both sides fired flares throughout the night that lighted the surroundings while still high in the air and then re-ignite a few seconds later.

The minutes would drag by agonizingly slowly. Visions of an enemy patrol creeping your way would cross your mind as your imagination worked up. You would hope and pray that it never really happened, and fortunately for our squad, it never did.

In all the time that we did such outpost duty, there were only a couple of incidents that varied from this routine for me. Usually, before dawn we returned to our silo, following the same path we had come on, which was mostly drainage channels which afforded us same cover and protection.

One night I was posted in a foxhole at the top of the bank of a drainage channel that led toward enemy lines. All was quiet as usual, and after some time I glanced to my left across the channel. I could see silhouetted the helmet of whoever it was, not from our squad, that occupied that position. I had not known until then that someone was posted there, and I took comfort in having company nearby. It was shortly after that, suddenly there was a small explosion in the channel and a few yards in front of us. Instinctively I ducked. My heart pounding in excitement and fright, I wondered,

"What the hell was that? If any Germans are coming, I'll be damned if I'm going to let them shoot me cowering in my hole!"

So, rifle ready, I peered over the top of my foxhole towards where the explosion had occurred. It was somewhat dark and I couldn't see anything or detect any movement. I didn't even think to check if the fellow across the ditch was doing the same. But there was nothing, and all was quiet again. Awake of relief washed over me and the tension subsided same. I never was able to figure out what that explosion was. It could be that the fellow across the ditch threw a grenade out there, but I don't know.

The other incident occurred as we were heading towards the outposts one evening. A lieutenant led the way, and I was second or third in line. As usual we were walking in the drainage channels that crisscrossed the area.

Suddenly, the lieutenant hastily backpedaled a few steps, bumped into me, and fell down. Startled, I looked ahead and saw a figure outlined on the trail ahead. He raised his arms over his head and must have said something, though I'm not sure. Quickly some of us positioned ourselves on the flanks in case there were more of them while others took custody of the lone figure. I heard one of the guys say,

"I think he dropped something."

A quick search of the nearby ground yielded nothing; the German was apparently alone. The prisoner, whom the intelligence section would be most eager to interrogate, was escorted to the rear and we resumed our trek to the outposts. Before departing I made a mental note of the location of the spot, in particular a low bush and the approximate distance to the next right-angle turn.

On the way back before daylight the next morning, I positioned myself last in line. As we approached the spot where the German had surrendered, I pointed my toes outward and slowly dragged my feet across the foot-high grass alongside the trail. After a few yards,

"Thump!" My foot hit something and I reached down in the dark to pick it up. Instantly, as I touched the object, I recognized by feel that it was a pair of binoculars. I had hoped it would be a pistol, but what the hell, it was still a good souvenir trophy, and feeling very pleased with myself, I hurried to catch up with the column.

Another morning we returned to our daytime position to find that a tank destroyer, which is itself a kind of a tank mounting a 90-millimeter gun, had moved into position next to our silo. It remained there for a few days and we had occasion to chat with some of the crew. I was surprised to find that one of them was armed with an Army revolver. I had always thought American troops all used the 1911 model Colt semiautomatic pistol.

If we were not on patrol or outpost duty at night, we occupied foxholes about fifty yards from the silo and stood guard duty. It was there one night that I first experienced a shelling by mortars. Fortunately, it was just a few shells. One landed a few yards away in the same drainage channel as our foxhole. I could see the flash of the explosion and smell the burned powder.

Later, as I sat staring across the grassy field, I had some kind of premonition. It felt like I could hear a rustling sound and I bent over, lowering my head forward and down.

"Whap!"

What must have been a stray bullet hit the sandbag behind me where my head had been a moment earlier. Why or how I don't know, but something had told me to duck. (Lucky Number 1.)

Our farm silo daytime shelter was occasionally shelled by enemy artillery or mortars, usually just a few rounds. One artillery shell actually clipped the side of the silo while we were inside, but it was a dud and did not explode. We heard and felt it clip the silo and then thud into the ground. I'm sure the same thought crossed our minds:

"I hope it didn't hit the dead horse lying outside. If it did, there's going to be an awful stench around here."

It didn't, but it was close both ways. Some knowledgeable person later sprinkled lime over the carcass and we were never bothered by any odor.

Some nights we ran contact patrols to neighboring platoons stationed at neighboring farmhouses about a half mile away. By rotation we had all learned the route so that patrol assignments were facilitated. Early on, one patrol took a detour and stumbled onto a cabbage patch, which kept us supplied with fresh heads to supplement our 10-in-1 rations of canned and packaged goods. Some of the boys were pretty good cooks, I thought.

It was also standard practice for us, as soon as it got dark, to grab an entrenching tool, hurry outside into a field, quickly dig a hole, squat, and take a crap. No time to dillydally, for the Germans, being no fools, knew that things started to happen as soon as it got dark and would occasionally randomly shell some of the buildings just about then. We didn't lose anyone that way, though.

On several occasions we were awakened from our daytime sleep by the sound of antiaircraft gunfire. By following the bursts of smoke from the shellfire, we could spot the enemy bombers in the distance and their evasive actions. As much as we hoped, we never saw any of the enemy planes get hit and go down; they always got away. Judging from the amount of ordinance thrown at them, we guessed the Americans must at least have scared them.

With the front stationary for a long period, there was a need for information, and periodic patrols were dispatched to capture enemy soldiers for interrogation, but with little success.

One night about six of us, led by a lieutenant, went on such a patrol. From our line we crept and crawled forward through ditches and grain fields toward the enemy lines, though I, for one, had no idea where they might be. As expected, occasional flares lit the sky and we would remain motionless. At one point the lieutenant directed us to take firing positions in a semicircle. I crept into a shallow depression and started to push away some of the loose, dry dirt under me to improve my "foxhole."

My hand struck something solid that I couldn't move, and as I gripped the object, I realized that it was the tail end of an unexploded mortar shell, a dud. If it hadn't exploded when it landed, it was unlikely that it would explode from my handling it, but nevertheless, I got the hell out of there and moved a few feet over. Though we had moved a few hundred yards towards the enemy lines, we heard and saw nothing. Shortly afterward the lieutenant motioned us to head back, and we returned the way we had come.

I suppose the mission could be called a failure, but as far as I was concerned, we were lucky. We didn't get spotted and shot at, we didn't run into any mines, nothing happened, and except for a little wear and tear on the nerves, we all returned safely. (Lucky Number 2.)

The routine at Anzio was coming to an end. There were rumors that the big push to Rome would be starting very soon.

