

## THE CHAMPAGNE CAMPAIGN

After about 4 months I was fully recovered and rejoined the outfit in Southern France, near the Riviera, in the French Alps on the border with Italy. This phase of the units' assignment got to be referred to as the Champagne Campaign because there was hardly any combat and consequently much time for passes and visits to Nice, Beausoleil, and its environs, which bordered Monte Carlo. For all, it was partly a time for cognac, wine, champagne, beer, and women.

The outposts in the mountains stretched along the snow-covered border. A trail from outside the seaside town of Menton led to the ridge which was the border between the two countries. The first night there I removed my shoes to sleep in the dugout, and when it was my turn for guard duty in the wee hours of the morning. I could not get my feet into my shoes. The shoes were frozen solid in the cold. I had to light a candle and slowly thaw the shoes over the flame so that I could put them on. This took time, and I was very late in relieving the fellow on guard duty. To make up for it, I stood duty for the rest of the night, until daylight.

This was my first experience roughing it in snow. Constant foot traffic on the trail had compacted the snow into ice. The rubber soles of our shoes became very hard in the cold and made the footing very slippery. I took many a tumble under those conditions.

Shortly after my return the lieutenant asked me to take over one of the squads. By then I knew that the war was winding down, and I did not want the responsibility. Besides, there had been some replacements while I was gone, and there was already someone in that role and I did not want to displace anyone. So I declined and took instead an open assignment as the bazooka or rocket launcher person for the platoon.

Home for us was a crude hut built of logs and earth-filled artillery shell tubes against a cut in the hillside. It had been built by the troops whom the outfit relieved and though tight was large enough for four of us. Still, it was more comfortable than the dugouts used by those on the line several hundred yards away on the ridge line.

Each squad on the outposts was linked to the others by a field telephone. Supplies were brought up daily by mule and carried the last few hundred yards by each squad to its position. Our source of water was a spring part way down the trail, and I can still remember how heavy five gallons of water was, particularly when you had to lug it uphill.

There were no enemy incursions in our direction, at least while I was there, so life was somewhat relaxed and routine. Every evening someone would go down the trail toward no man's land to hook up trip wires set across the trail to a couple of grenades. This was to guard against anyone coming up that trail at night from the direction of the enemy. Each morning the trip wires were disconnected, as anyone approaching from that direction could easily be spotted.

Finally there came one night when the stillness was shattered as one of the grenades went off. It was quite loud and we grabbed our weapons and hurried outside, but all was now quiet, and nothing else happened. In the morning two of us went down to check and found the largest rabbit I had ever seen lying dead on the trail. We replaced the grenade and brought the rabbit back to show the others, but I don't remember what we did with it.

It was here, also, that I received the only package from home that I can recall. It contained the usual stuff -- cookies, toilet articles, and such -- and a band of white cloth with a lot of red dots sewn into it. I thought it was a filler or packing

material and discarded it along with the empty box. It was only many, many years later that I learned it was a seninbari, a Japanese charm, each of the thousand dots sewn by a different person, which was supposed to bring you luck and return you home safely.

The foregoing serves to illustrate how little exposure to Japanese culture I had while growing up and how ignorant I was of things Japanese. As for the seninbari, I'm thankful I didn't need it, for luck was with me and I survived the war.

As an aside, it was only this year (1995) that I learned at a family gathering that my mother had prayed daily for my brother and me throughout the war.

Our sojourn in Southern France came to its inevitable end and we returned by ship to Northern Italy for the last big push of the war.