

THE LAST CAMPAIGN

There is nothing I can remember about our trip back to Italy from France and I can recall little of what we did while preparing for the assault on the Gothic Line, which stretched from coast to coast across the Italian peninsula.

Something I do remember is that Spud Munemori and I for some reason had been brought back to the company headquarters. The evening before we were to rejoin the company in the field, we by chance discovered that the company supply, in late March, still had boxes and boxes of Christmas candy. Upon being told that we could help ourselves, we each loaded up a musette bag with candy and ventured into the town, figuring to give some kids a treat.

At first we were disappointed because the street was deserted. We soon came across a couple of youngsters and started giving them candy. People must have been watching us, as quickly more kids began to appear. Soon we had a small mob. We had naively hoped to have them line up nicely, GI style, but instead they swarmed over us, pressing us against a doorway, screaming, yelling, pushing, and grabbing. Sensing that the situation was out of control, we desperately dumped all the candy on the street and took off as the kids went after what they could get.

Our intentions had been good, but we had not realized how starved for sweets these children were. Somewhat chastened and chagrined for having caused a mini-riot, we walked slowly back in silence, reflecting upon the sadder aspects of war upon people.

A few days later the war resumed. We climbed up a mountain ridge in the darkness before dawn. Our objective was an enemy strong point at the second peak. As we moved up, our artillery opened up and pounded the enemy positions. Some of the shells were a little short and landed very close to us. While it was standard procedure to hit the enemy positions with a heavy barrage before attacking, it also alerted the enemy to our coming. The Germans had had months to prepare their defenses and had developed them well. Mines had been laid in front of their emplacements to deter and hamper attacking forces.

This time A Company was to make the assault and our platoon was to lead. Our objective was the first enemy strong point at the top of the peak designated Georgia Hill. I was not aware of the specific assignment of the three squads, but as the bazooka person, I was supposed to go around the right side at the top and hit the enemy emplacement with rocket shells.

Amidst the explosions and shooting, we had no idea of what was happening with the different squads. It was still semi-dark, and we were now very close, within yards of the top of the ridge. My two assistants and I clambered over a small ridge to get closer and locate our target, the emplacement at the top of the ridge. After a few yards we came to a sheer rock face, and then further to the right a vertical drop down. We couldn't go over and we couldn't go around. There were some muffled sounds of explosions ahead and I heard the lieutenant say,

"There goes our bazooka!"

"No, lieutenant. We're over here. We can't go any further!"

"Well, come back and shoot it from here."

So the three of us came back the few yards. They loaded the bazooka, and I fired off the first rocket. There was no clearly discernible target, so I tried to hit near the top of what I thought would be the emplacement. I think it was a little too high, for it caroomed off without exploding. The next one I put a

little lower, and it exploded when it hit, but I had no idea if it did any damage to anything. I did not have the feeling of having accomplished something.

There had been all kinds of firing and shooting going on, but again, I did not know and could not tell what was happening except right around me. As it got lighter, I could see that there was a wire stretching across the ridge line in front of us. I couldn't understand it. Three of us had gone over the ridge and then come back across it. How could three of us go over and back and not trip the wire? And yet we had! Maybe it malfunctioned or was not hooked up to a mine or was part of a telephone line. Or was it pure luck? (Lucky Number 12.)

With daylight, also, we could see occasional enemy grenades hurtling towards us. Fortunately, they either landed on the other side of the ridge in front of us or went sailing over us and down the mountain side. We could also see some wood box shoe mines which must have been exposed by the battering from artillery barrages. Knowing how they were set off, some of our guys were able to gingerly pick them up and toss them over the sheer drop on one side of us.

One of our guys was lying dead face down a few yards to the left front of us.

"Who is that? Does anybody know?"

No one answered. I guess we all felt bad about it.

In part because of the constant turnover, we generally did not get to know the individual replacements. I don't even remember who it was that loaded the bazooka as I held it. Maybe unconsciously we did not form too many close associations because it hurts when a good friend gets it, and you don't want to go through that too many times.

We knew that Jerries were very close because of the grenades being thrown our way. Every now and then our guys would shoot towards the Jerry position and the Jerries would return the fire. Oddly, while much of the firing was not from very far away, I do not recall the sound, the sharp, piercing crack of machine guns and rifle fire. Being at the top of a peak may have something to do with that.

During one of these exchanges, I heard an odd, clinking, metallic sound and turned to hear the man next to me utter a soft groan and slump forward against the earth bank of the ridge. I could see that he had been shot through the helmet and just above the left eyebrow.

I never learned his name. I don't think I was exposed, but I wondered if it could have been me instead. (Lucky Number 13.)

Pat Sakamoto, whom I think was the platoon messenger, was angry that Jerry had just killed one of ours. He cursed, took his rifle, and started to peer around a large rock at the edge of the sheer drop. He was greeted with a blast from a machine gun. I hadn't heard the shot that had just killed our man, but that machine gun blast I remember hearing. Fortunately Pat was not hit but pulled his head back quickly and dropped the idea of trying to get the enemy gunner from there.

We dug in and took some shelling, but it was mostly somewhat farther to the left of us. I don't know who was positioned there and getting it.

Sometime later men from other companies went through the A Company positions and carried the fight further down and up the ridge. How they fared I never really knew.

In terms of casualties that morning had been the second worst day for our platoon. I don't know how many, but we had lost a few killed, including Spud Munemori, who was later to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously. Originally from Glendale, California, he had joined us shortly after Anzio and we had been good buddies. He was a kotonk who had quickly and easily

adapted to our ways, including our manner of speech. I don't know how I learned he had died, but it was a sad day for me.

He occasionally used to burst out singing "O Sole Mio" at the top of his voice, often enough that I became familiar with it and came to love that song. Now whenever I hear it, I cannot help but think of him.

We also had many wounded, including the lieutenant, who stepped on a mine and had a foot blown off.

As I mentioned elsewhere, the individual GI often is unaware of what has happened with others nearby. I still do not know what each squad encountered during the assault on Georgia Hill, even though we were all part of the same platoon and were within yards of each other near the top of the hill. We were preoccupied with our own thoughts and situations and not particularly disposed to talking about it.

Someone remarked later that four American tanks had tried to round a curve in the road in the valley below us. The German artillery knocked out all four, and with only four rounds, one for each tank. Our guys could see it happening, but I don't remember it. I must have been catching up on some sleep at the time.

After A Company had taken its objectives and B and C Companies had advanced past us to take over the lead role, we were able to examine the Jerry emplacement we had taken.

There were a few dead Jerries lying around. A curving trench led to a covered shelter which had protected them well from our artillery, as there was no sign of damage inside. Now abandoned, it was littered with clothing, blankets, cooking utensils, and such.

I found a battered Iron Cross medal which I kept as a souvenir. I'm not sure, but I think this is where I recovered a damaged set of binoculars, also.

A Company remained on Georgia Hill as the other companies pressed ahead on the attack. At one point direct air support had been called in, and we watched as four American P47 fighter planes made several passes over the enemy positions on the ridge a few hundred yards in front of us. The Thunderbolts dropped bombs, fired rockets, and strafed the enemy lines with machine gun fire before leaving.

Sometime later we could see an enemy party apparently evacuating some of its wounded while carrying a large flag with a red cross.

I know nothing about the various battles in the struggle to capture the various peaks along the way, but shortly the entire ridge leading to the highest point was all taken between the 100th and the 442nd.

Company A then followed the other companies' advance over a well-defined trail which snaked its way up, first on one side of the hill, then on the ridge line, and then along the steep side of the broad valley to the right. A few Jerry dead lay sprawled below the trail at one spot.

It was another of those things I did not remember, but fifty years later a friend was to confirm that while we were on the peaks and ridges, the Ligurian Sea was clearly visible in the distance to our left.

Other elements of the 100th-442nd were encountering resistance here and there, but for us now it was just walking, moving through the mountainous terrain. While up in those mountains, we received word of the death of the President, another disheartening day.

We descended and crossed at the edge of the town of Carrara and climbed back up the mountain through a marble quarry. Bilge slabs and pieces of marble were strewn along the hillside, and even greater slabs were partially out from the mountain side. A few Italian citizens accompanied us and guided us through the area. One, a teenage girl with sturdy legs, insisted on carrying my pack up the hill.

An attempt was made to drop supplies to us via a light Piper Cub aircraft, but I don't recall that we recovered any of the stuff they tried to deliver.

It was somewhere in these mountains that we saw the last enemy dead, a small group lying on a hillside trail, including a giant figure who must have been close to seven feet tall.

By this time we knew from news reports that the war in Europe was almost over. There is little about where we were and what we did in those last few days that I can remember clearly. Indeed, when news of the German surrender came, I don't remember where we were. I know we just accepted it with relief. There was no jubilation, no spontaneous celebration. I guess we were tired of war, or just tired.